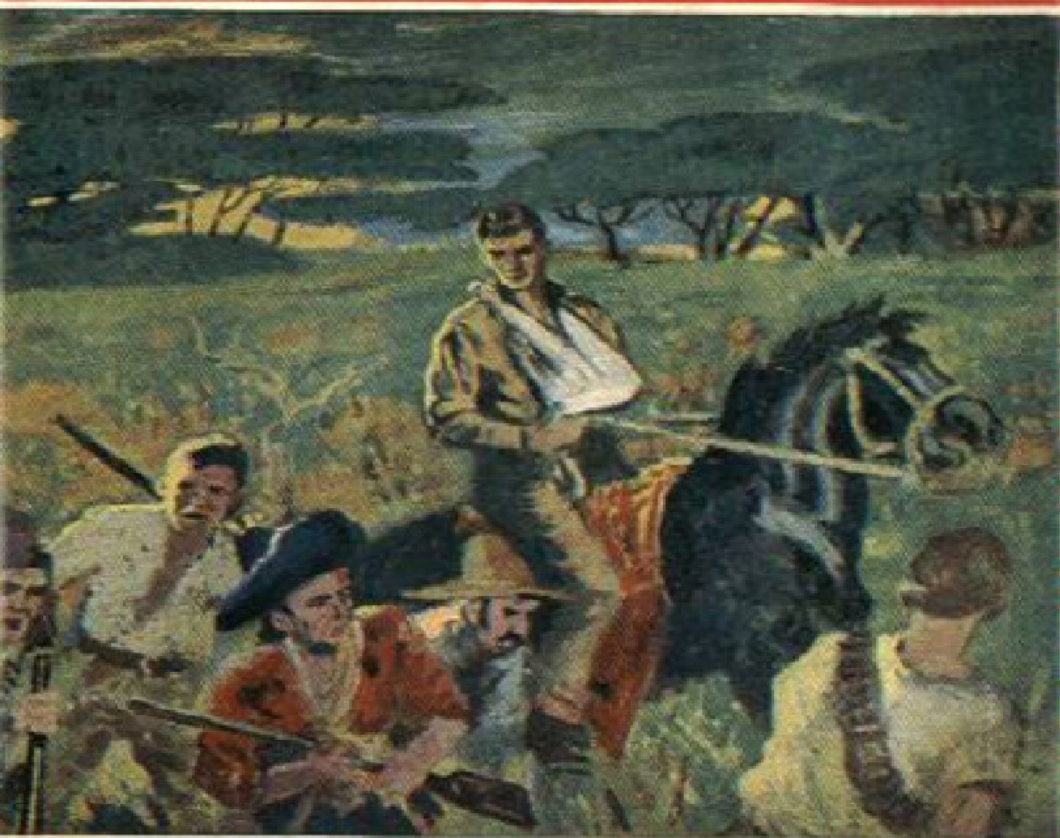


Biggles takes a Holiday

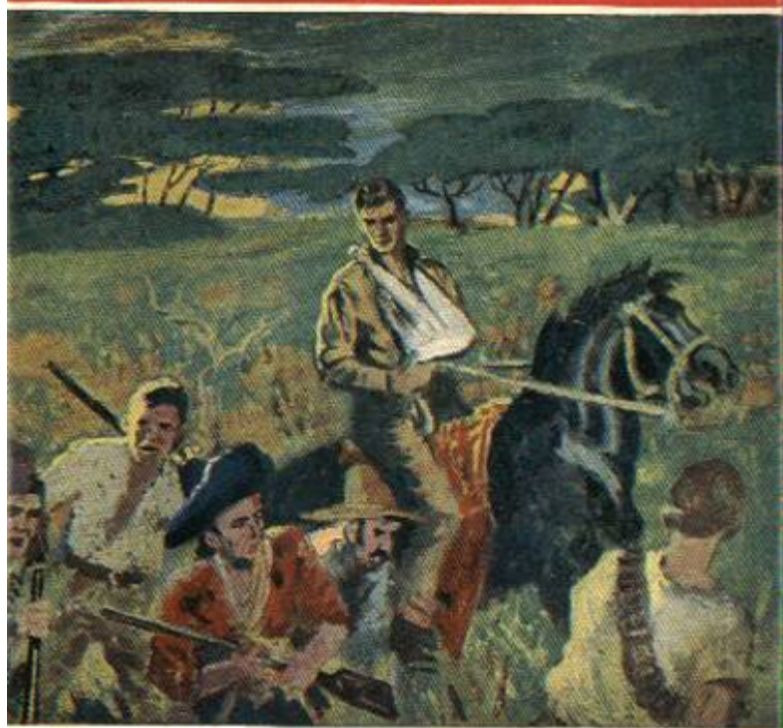
Captain W.E. Johns



Illustrated by Sleud

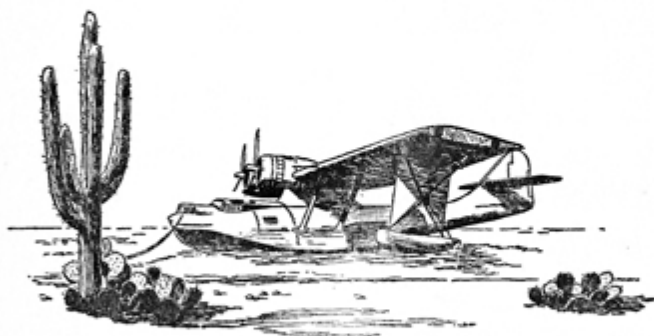
Biggles takes a Holiday

Captain W.E. Johns



Illustrated by Stead

Biggles *takes a Holiday* *Captain W.E. Johns*



Illustrated by Stead

London Hodder and Stoughton Limited

A MESSAGE FROM OVER THE SEA

"

GINGER" HEBBLETHWAITE looked up from the album in which he was mounting stamps as a footfall sounded in the hall outside. He glanced in turn at Algy Lacey and Bertie Lissie, who occupied arm-chairs on either side of the fire, and then resumed his occupation.

"That sounds like Biggles now," he observed. "He told me he wasn't going out. Air Commodore Raymond has been prodding him to finish the handbook he's doing on '

Crime And The Aeroplane' for the new Air Police Service. From what I can see he's done nothing more to it, so he must have been out for some time. It looks as if something happened while we were at the flicks."

The door opened and Biggles entered. Walking over to the fire he stood with his back to it, warming his hands. "It's kind of chilly outside," he remarked.

"I thought you weren't going out ? " Ginger reminded him.

"I thought so, too," confirmed Biggles. "Somebody decided otherwise."

"Who was it—the Chief ? " Ginger closed his album and slipped unused mounts into their envelope.

"No, strange to relate, on this occasion it was not." Biggles pulled up a chair, reached for the cigarette box and made himself comfortable.

"Who was it—if I'm not being nosy ? " inquired Bertie.

Biggles tossed the spill from which he had lighted his cigarette into the fire. "As a matter of fact, it was the Matron of the London Hospital for Tropical Diseases."

Bertie dropped his eyeglass but caught it neatly. "Well, blow me down " he ejaculated. "I should never have guessed that one."

"What's wrong—somebody got a dose of malaria ? " prompted Algy.

"There was a man there with blackwater fever, which is worse," went on Biggles. "I had never seen him before, and, if it comes to that, I shall never see him again. He died while I was there. The Matron must have known that the end was not far off ; she 'phoned me and asked me to come down right away."

"Why should she ask you to come down to see a man you didn't know ? "questioned Ginger.

"She was speaking for her patient. He had a message for me."

Ginger joined the circle at the fire. "But why—?"

"If you'll stop firing questions at me like a lot of quiz masters I'll tell you all about it,"

interrupted Biggles. "None of you will have forgotten our old friend Angus Mackail, I think. Well, this fellow I saw today—his name, by the way, was Linton—has been with Angus for the past twelve months."

"Where's Angus now ? " demanded Algy. "I took a dim view of him dropping us as if we were a bunch of lepers. He said he would keep in touch."

"He couldn't," returned Biggles evenly. "There were no postmen operating where he was."

"And where was that ? "

"Apparently somewhere in the middle of South America."

"But when he was invalided on account of that crash he had in Burma* he told me he thought of going in for farming," asserted Ginger.

"That's just what he did—or what he tried to do," returned Biggles. "He didn't necessarily mean that he intended to stay in this country. But if you'll give me time to get my breath I'll tell you the story of what happened to Angus as this fellow Linton told it to me. It's a queer tale, so queer that it takes a bit of swallowing ; but as a dying man would have no reason to concoct such a story it must be true."

Biggles settled a little lower in his chair.

"When I saw Linton he was just about all in, and I fancy he knew it," continued Biggles.

"I've seen some scarecrows in my time but I never saw anything quite like this one. He looked ghastly. He was skin and bone, and his skin wasn't very pretty, either. It was yellow, and the bones were pushing through. Only his eyes were alive, and they glowed like a couple of landing beacons—horrible. That was the fever of course, burning him up.

He had a tale to tell me, and if you'll listen, so that I can keep the thing in order, I'll tell it to you. As he told it—well, it was. a bit disjointed, incoherent in places, as considering the condition he was in it was bound to be. I'll try to straighten it out as I go along."

Biggles drew thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"The story begins in the spring of 1946," he resumed. "Linton had been a soldier, a captain in the First Airborne Division. He was captured at Arnheim, later repatriated, and being a farmer in civil life he got an early discharge. He drew his gratuity and looked around. The first thing to do was find a farm, and that, apparently, was not easy. Looking down at the advertisement columns of a farming paper one day a notice caught his eye. It invited people with a little capital to take up land in a new international colony that had been established in South America. A glowing account of the place was given, so the prospects, to a man out of a job, looked pretty good. Personally, I should have thought they sounded a bit too good—but there, maybe I'm suspicious by nature of things that sound all bright and beautiful. In this case, all you had to do was go to South America, to Buenos Aires to be precise, where a man would meet you, hand over your cash and then make a nice easy fortune in the most attractive surroundings."

"And I suppose it was all lies from beginning to end ? " put in Bertie simply.

"Not entirely," demurred Biggles. "The place was there all right."

"If I remember my geography, South America is a biggish place," Ginger pointed out. "

Where exactly was this get-rich-quick set-up ? "

Biggles smiled wanly. "There seems to be a little doubt about that. The State boundaries of some of the South American Republics run through jungles not properly explored, much less surveyed. They may look clearly defined on the map, but in fact, when you get to the spot there is nothing to indicate whose territory you are standing on, for which reason the countries concerned occasionally have a private war to decide on the ownership of a piece of ground that's no use to anyone, anyway. But that's no concern of ours. Paradise Valley, the name under which this colony advertises itself, seems to be somewhere in the region where the boundaries of Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia meet, which, if my memory serves me, is just about slap in the middle of the continent. Linton was obviously in some doubt about it, as he was bound to be, having been taken to the place by a man who carefully avoided any reference to the actual site. Linton admitted frankly that Paradise Valley might be in any one of the three countries I have mentioned, or possibly a little bit in all of them. He

wasn't concerned overmuch as to the actual locality. Neither need we be. What I've told you is near enough for our purpose.

" Very well then. Linton got permission to emigrate, put his money—about five hundred pounds—in his pocket, and set sail for Buenos Aires, at which port the agent was to meet him. On the boat he met Angus who, it turned out, had also seen the advertisement, and was bound for the same destination. That's how they got together. Having both been in the war they compared notes, and that was how Linton first heard about us. Incidentally, Angus took the best part of a thousand pounds with him. By the time they got to Buenos Aires they were good friends.

"The first part of the journey overland was not too bad, according to Linton ; but the finish, when they had gone too far to turn back, it was complete and utter hell—at any rate, that's how Linton described it to me and I see no reason to doubt it. First, after leaving the railhead, which itself is not so civilised as to be noticeable, there was a ride in a ramshackle truck, cross-country, mostly over cactus desert, for about three hundred miles to a fair sized river called the Palito. I've never heard of it—but there are plenty of rivers in South America that few people outside the country have heard of. All Linton could tell was, its course is generally northward, so it is probably a tributary of the Amazon. Anyway, on arrival at the river a boat was waiting, a steam launch with its furnace adapted for wood burning. This craft belongs, as does the truck, to the boss of Paradise Valley—I'll tell you more about him presently. A fortnight's journey of still more hell, now through steaming swamp and jungle, took our ill-advised emigrants to their destination."

"Why on earth didn't they turn back ? " interposed Algy.

Biggles shrugged. "Would you have turned back after you'd parted with your money ? "

"No, I suppose not," admitted Algy reluctantly.

"Of course not," averred Biggles warmly. "Having started on a big enterprise any man with blood in his veins tries to see it through. But let me go on. The place was, said Linton, a valley ; he admitted that ; but that was where any relation with the name ended.

A more appropriate title would have been The Valley of Hades. There was not a redeeming feature. The valley is, Linton assured me, a bug-ridden, snake-invested area of sun-blistered red mud that would not of

itself support a family of aboriginal Indians.

During the dry season the mud becomes dust. On this insolubrious slice of the earth's surface live—or rather, exist—in unspeakable squalor and misery, more than seventy wretched victims of the lying advertisement, in wooden huts not fit for swine. There is no proper water supply, no sanitation, no furniture apart from what the people make themselves, and that is eaten almost as soon as it's made by those destructive little beasts, white ants. This, then, was the unsavoury mess in which Angus and Linton found themselves, and it didn't take them long to see how neatly they'd been tricked."

"But surely it didn't take them long, either, to decide that it was no place for them ? "said Ginger.

"That is exactly what they did decide," continued Biggles. "Naturally, they wondered why anybody stayed, and it was only after they had walked round and spoken to some of the so-called farmers that they learned the full extent of the pitfall into which they had so casually jumped with both feet. For the first two or three hundred miles the only way out is through sheer jungle. The only highway is the river. There's only one boat and it belongs to the boss. Get the idea ? He doesn't try to prevent you from leaving, but he points out that the Indians who live in the jungle, who are little better than animals, do not like white men, and should one fall into their hands, well, he's had it, and in a not very nice manner. The boss is sorry he can't lend you the boat because he's using it himself. He's also sorry he can't let you have any food. Actually, Linton said, there is good reason to suppose that the savages are really in the boss's pay ; at any rate, he gives them food when they bring in anyone who tries to escape. And even if you survive the jungle, how are you going to cross the cactus desert without a compass, without water, or anything to carry water in ? Yes, the boss has got it all worked out very nicely. As I have said, there are no bars or bolts, or anything like that ; there is nothing to prevent you going home if you feel like it, but few people have the nerve to try. The fact is, without help from the man who brought you in you can't get out, and that's all there is to it. The alternative is to stay—and work."

"I wouldn't work for the swine I" declared Ginger hotly.

"In that case you would simply starve to death,"

Biggles pointed out. "You see, the boss is the only man with any grub. When you first get there you have to buy it, because, as he says, he

can't afford to give it away. So while you have any money you buy the stuff that keeps you alive, at the blackest of black market rates, from his canteen. When your money is finished you either work or starve."

"What sort of work ? "inquired Algy curiously.

"Farming. You till the soil. If you work really hard for about sixteen hours a day it is possible, apparently, to raise a small crop of maize or lentils. The rats get most of it.

What's left you give to the boss in return for clothes, tools, and so on, otherwise you would go naked, in which case the sun would blister the hide off your back. Get the idea

? This smart guy of a boss gets you all ways. In the end most people give up trying. The climate, and the fever from which everyone suffers, would soon induce that state of mind, no doubt. If you can't stand it you just lie down and die, your place being taken by the next victim who steps into the trap. When he arrives he is given the choice of taking over a strip of uncleared ground, or, by paying through the nose for it, he can have a piece made vacant by the death of the former tenant. As I told you just now, when Linton was there the colony was occupied by about seventy people, young and old, representing most of the nations of Europe, with one or two Americans thrown in. Some fellows, poor devils, took their wives out with them. Some have kids. That's the most hellish part of it. There they are, and there they are likely to stay. They try to help each other, particularly those who fall sick, or go crazy, as some do. About the only thing you get free is medical attention—that's the way Linton put it."

"But listen here, old warrior," put in Bertie. "There's an angle to this I don't get. If there are seventy people, why don't they pull together and knock the block off this infernal ruffian, biff him on the boko—if you see what I mean ? "

"That's the queer part of it," admitted Biggles. "One would think that would be a natural reaction. Angus was all for it. When he and Linton got the situation sized up they went to the boss to tell him a few home truths about his precious Paradise. What happened ? I'll tell you. The boss was graciousness itself. He invited them in to dinner, did them proud, and then played Chopin on the piano. Believe it or not, they went home feeling like a couple of cads for doubting the man's good intentions. They were fiat out to help him make a little paradise of the place, far away from the noise and crookedness of a wicked

civilization. Others had precisely the same experience. Don't ask me how it's done.

Linton couldn't tell me. He swore that the man has some sort of mesmeric power, and that's not impossible, bearing in mind that by the time people get rebellious they are in a weak physical condition, in which case they might bow to a powerful personality."

Biggles lit another cigarette.

"I'll tell you more about him, while Linton's narrative is still fresh in my mind," he went on. "His nationality is a mystery. Some say he's a German, some an Austrian, some a Czech, some a Russian. The fact is, nobody knows except the man himself, and he doesn't

talk about it. He calls himself Doctor Liebgarten, which sounds German enough, but is probably an assumed name. However, it may provide a clue to the man's real character—

I'll come back to that presently. He speaks English, Spanish, French, German and Italian with equal fluency, to say nothing of local dialects, which means that he must have been in the country for a long time. That's worth bearing in mind. His appearance is striking, and his clothes immaculate, although that may be largely a matter of comparison with the miserable people he controls. He's a tall, well-built man of between fifty and sixty, good-looking in a way, dignified, with a gentle benevolent smile. He's always the same. No one has ever seen him angry, although that in my opinion is a bad sign. I don't like people who have such an iron grip on their emotions that you don't know what they're really thinking. They're usually pretty cold-blooded inside. Liebgarten is a scholar of the first order ; the books in his library, which Linton saw, are sufficient proof of that. He is also a brilliant pianist. He has a grand piano, although goodness knows how he got it there.

But the most unusual thing about him is his teeth. If he is to be believed he made them himself. They are dentures, but they are not ivory. They're made of some sort of metal, some say steel, others duralumin. Anyway, they give him a somewhat sinister appearance when he shows them, as he does when he smiles. His voice is soft and low, like the purring of a contented cat—that was how Linton put it. He has never been known to use force—not that there's any need if he can get all he wants with his persuasive tongue.

The curse of it is, in order to keep in his good books there are a few

among his victims who are ready to squeal on the rest, for which reason no man dare speak his mind for fear of being reported and having his rations cut off. I can't help feeling that there's a touch of the old Nazi methods there. Anyway, this amiable, accommodating, hypercritical devil knows everything that goes on."

"Does he live with the rest of them ? " asked Bertie, polishing his eyeglass thoughtfully.

"Oh no, nothing like that," returned Biggles grimly. "He lives in a magnificent house, built in early Spanish Colonial style, set in a delightful garden. Here he lives in luxury, eating epicurean food and drinking choice wines like a medieval tyrant. You can't easily get to him because the whole place is surrounded by what appears to be a hedge of flowering cacti, but is in fact an impenetrable barrier several feet thick. There is one gate, apparently unguarded, but there is reason to suppose that it's always watched by one of several negroes who form a sort of bodyguard."

"Does he live alone ? "inquired Algy.

"As far as is known he lives in the house with one or two servants, including a secretary, a steward and a chef.

Other people have been seen in the garden, but nobody seems to know who they are or just what they are doing there. I forgot to mention that there is another building in the garden, a long, low bungalow which stands some distance back. No one has any idea of what's inside it, for the simple reason that no one has ever been allowed to go near it.

Obviously, it's there for a purpose, and we must assume that it is occupied by somebody.

Well, that's the set-up, and for novelty it would be hard to beat. Thinking about it on the way home I rather suspect that the bungalow may hide the real secret of the place."

"What sort of secret—if you see what I mean ? " murmured Bertie.

Biggles extended his hands. "How could I know ? I asked Linton if this man Liebgarten was sane or crazy—an obvious question. He said he wasn't sure, but he was inclined to think that he was sane. I asked him if he thought this farming racket was genuine. That is to say, is this doctor chap really trying to make a little paradise of the place, or is he just a crook out for the money his victims bring with them."

"I should say he's just a cheap crook," declared Ginger emphatically.

Biggles looked dubious. "I'm by no means sure of that. Consider the psychological factors. First of all, there's the man's name, real or assumed, Liebgarten, which is simply German for 'dear garden'. Was it the fact that he was born with that name that first put the idea into his head that his mission in life was to build an earthly paradise ? Stranger things have happened. Or was it the nature of the task that suggested the name ? It would be interesting to know. Again, why does he persist in the scheme, knowing as he must that it will end in failure ? "

"Obviously, for the money he's making out of it," asserted Algy.

Biggles became terse. "Listen," he requested. "This business has been going on for at least six years. We know that because Linton spoke to a man who had been there for nearly that length of time, and when he arrived there were already a dozen people on the spot. The miserable victims die at the rate of about twenty a year. They all brought money, not less than a few hundred pounds. If that's been going on for years the man running the show must have already picked up a tidy fortune. Why does he stay there ? What's he waiting for ? "

"Perhaps he likes the life," suggested Algy.

Biggles shook his head. "Not one man in a million likes being buried in the back of beyond for ever." "Maybe he is the millionth man ? "

"In that case what does he want with all this money ? He can't spend it there. True, a lot of stuff comes up in the launch ; and even though the man does live in luxury it's hard to see how he can spend thousands of pounds a year. What could he spend it on ? No, that's where the story goes wrong somehow. What's the sense in making a million and then staying where you can't spend the money ? "

"Maybe the idea of power appeals to him ? " offered Ginger.

"What power is there in having dominion over fewer than a hundred miserable disease-ridden slaves ? " sneered Biggles. "Why, with the money he's got the fellow could command more power in London, Paris or New York."

"But just a minute," put in Algy. "We can discuss that later. What I want to know is, where is Angus now, and how did Linton get out of a place from which, by your own account, it is impossible to escape ? "

"I didn't say it was impossible to escape," protested Biggles. "I said that the chances of escape were so remote as to be hardly worth considering. Linton did escape, anyway.

Angus, if he's alive, is still there. I'll tell you how it came about. It seems that Angus and Linton decided that they would rather lose their lives than kow-tow to this self-made King of Paradise Valley. They would at least make an attempt to get out while they had their health and strength. They realised that once the fever got them it would be hopeless. They were discussing ways and means when they got an unexpected chance. The river came down in spate. Exploring the banks they found a native dug-out canoe washed up. They hid it in the jungle, and were collecting food for the journey—no easy matter, and one that took time—when Angus went down with fever. Linton would have stayed, but Angus wouldn't hear of it. He argued that Linton would be the next to go down with fever, and there was always a chance that natives would spot their tracks on the river bank and find the canoe. Linton's only chance was to get out then. He owed it to the other poor devils, anyway. This was their chance as well as his. The thing was to snatch it. Those were the lines on which Angus argued, and knowing him, we can well believe it. So Linton went." Biggles paused to light another cigarette.

"Linton didn't go into the details of that trip, but it must have been hell," he continued. "

With a poisoned arrow in his leg, more than half-starved, rotten with fever he got to the desert. He couldn't remember how he crossed it, but cross it he did, and more dead than alive got to the railway, where, having no money he jumped a goods train and so reached the coast. He struck it at a small port the name of which he had never heard, but apparently it was somewhere just north of Montevideo. By this time he was pretty well all in and didn't remember anything about the last part of the journey. At the finish he had a stroke of luck. A British tramp steamer was in. It had discharged its cargo and was just weighing anchor, bound for the Port of London. The skipper, who must have been a good type—for Linton was broke to the world—waived formalities and gave him a lift as supercargo. He thought that the sea trip would put Linton on his feet. Maybe it would have done had not the poison in Linton's leg prevented it from healing. To make a long story short he got to London, but he was a wreck of a man and the port doctor who saw him rushed him straight into hospital. Unfortunately it was too late. Poor Linton was too far gone. He must have known it, too, for he got the matron to send for me so that he could pass the story on before he died. He said he didn't think it was

much use going to the authorities—they wouldn't believe him. He was probably right, there. The story did take a bit of believing. He didn't tell it to me quite as I've told it to you. He got it out in bits and pieces, sometimes wandering in his mind, sometimes in sheer delirium, for which reason I couldn't ask him some of the questions that occurred to me. The answers would have been useful. At the end he sank into a coma and never came out of it. I fancy it was only his spirit, his determination that someone should know the facts, that kept him alive for so long. Once he had got the story off his chest he went out like a lamp that is switched off. That's all." Biggles tossed the stub of his cigarette into the fire.

There was a silence that lasted for some minutes.

It was broken by Algy. "What are we going to do about this ? " he asked quietly.

"Obviously, we shall have to go to look for Angus," answered Biggles slowly. "We can't leave him there, rotting in that stinking jungle, that's certain. It's nearly six months since Linton left him so he may be dead by now—but we'll ignore that angle for the time being."

Bertie cleared his throat. "Quite . . . absolutely," he murmured.

"How do we go ? " questioned Ginger.

"I'm certainly not going to walk," returned Biggles shortly. "An aircraft, a marine aircraft for operating on the river, or better still, an amphibian, is obviously the best way of getting in and out of the domain of this jungle king. Whether it would be easier to get an aircraft here, where we should have the Air Commodore to sponsor us, or over the other side, is a question we shall have to discuss. A spot of careful navigating will have to be done when we do get there, anyway. We shall have to watch our steps, too, because most countries, for reasons best known to themselves, are getting mighty particular about who flies

over their territory. Most of them have spies on the brain. However, I'll give the matter some thought during the evening. Tomorrow we'll get cracking."

II

FIRST OBJECTIVE

TEN days later a medium-sized heavily-camouflaged aircraft of the

flying-boat class circled for a minute or two before landing on a long straight pool that was almost a lake at the headwaters of the Rio Parana, that mighty stream which, after more than a thousand wandering miles, at last finds the sea in the wide mouth of the Rio de la Plata and the South Atlantic Ocean. With twin engines growling the machine felt its way cautiously into the shade of the trees which, like a black margin, fringed the southern bank. The sullen mutter of the engines faded to silence. An anchor plopped. The cockpit cover rasped as it was thrust open. Biggles' head and shoulders appeared.

Behind this simple statement of fact lay ten days of activity as intense as anything Ginger could recall. It had started on the morning following Biggles' visit to the Tropical Hospital and had continued almost without a break until the aircraft touched down on the Parana River. There had been so much to discuss, so much to do, that the time of every member of the party had been occupied to the full.

First, and this began within an hour of Biggles concluding his story of the events narrated by the gallant, but unfortunate Linton, there had been a conference, a discussion on ways and means during which the table had become more and more cluttered up with maps, instruments and books governing international rules for aircraft procedure.

As Biggles had pointed out, the most difficult part of the enterprise was to get to their destination without attracting too much attention to themselves, and without embarrassing any government by violating regulations, both national and international.

Actually, as things turned out, the getting there' was not the most difficult part of the operation ; but then, the events that were to complicate the quest could not by the wildest flight of imagination have been foreseen.

Biggles had taken the first obvious course of making inquiries about Paradise Valley at the London offices of each of the countries in which it might be situated, namely, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. In every case the reply was the same. Nothing was known of such a place, although a member of the Argentina Embassy, obviously willing to be helpful, admitted that this was not the first time that inquiries had been made—

presumably, Biggles 'supposed, by prospective emigrants who had seen the advertisement and had had the prudence to ask a few questions before committing themselves. Biggles did not of course

divulge his own interest in the matter ; it was, he decided, too early for that, and he could not see how it would serve any useful purpose.

Anyway, it was evident that Doctor Liebgarten had been careful to keep his bogus paradise clear of official notice. Whatever was going on, it was certainly not with the knowledge or connivance of any of the countries in which the valley might be situated.

Biggles then took his chief, Air Commodore Raymond of Scotland Yard, into his confidence. The Air Commodore was sympathetic but, as was to be expected, could not support officially any private scheme for the rescue of the inhabitants, British or otherwise, of Paradise Valley. More evidence would be required before that could even be considered, and as such evidence could not be obtained without a visit to the scene, there was, in common language, nothing doing. He offered to have the matter raised in the House of Commons, but this Biggles declined, knowing that not only would it jeopardise his own plans, but would warn those behind the racket that their organisation had been noticed and was under suspicion. He preferred to leave them in ignorance of this vital fact. Still, the Air Commodore, who admitted readily that something should be done, was prepared to let Biggles take a holiday for a couple of weeks. He would also lend a hand, unofficially, with the aircraft, equipment, and documents that would be necessary to carry out an investigation on the spot. Biggles would, he regretted, have to bear the cost of the expedition himself. The expense could not be defrayed out of public funds—not that Biggles would have made such 'a suggestion. The work of the British Air Police, which had been international in its application, had not passed unnoticed by the press and police forces of other countries, and as Biggles was known to have been associated with it he could rely on co-operation abroad provided he did not exceed reasonable limits. This, the Air Commodore opined, should smooth out a path in diplomatic circles that otherwise would have been extremely difficult.

Aware that it would not be easy as an individual to get an aircraft suitable for his purpose Biggles accepted the Air Commodore's offer with gratitude. In these circumstances he would, he decided, take a British machine and fly it to South America, following the usual route via Dakar, on the West Coast of Africa to Natal, in Brazil, and thence down the coast. An excuse for the flight could easily be furnished, and this, in the end, was the plausible one of a trial run to test in actual practice a new type of aircraft—a subterfuge which at least had an element of truth in it.

The machine selected was one of the Navigator class freighters

developed by the Planet Aircraft Corporation of Great Britain ; an eight-seater high-wing amphibious flying-boat fitted with twin Ursus Major air-cooled engines and long-range tanks for overseas work.

The wings folded for easy housing, and while the machine was not fast as modern speeds go it was of robust construction for rough work, and had an endurance range above the average of its class. It embodied a bow cockpit with storage space for marine gear. The cockpit was enclosed, with the pilot on the left side and detachable controls to the right seat. To the rear of the cockpit were navigation and wireless compartments with communicating doors giving access to the main cabin, built to seat four passengers or, alternatively, a considerable load of freight. So much for the machine.

Petrol and oil were indispensable commodities, the provision of which worried Biggles not a little. They would, of course, be obtainable at any regulation airport, but, as he pointed out, should they require a considerable quantity after crossing the Atlantic, unless it was for the homeward journey, they might be asked questions not easily answered ; questions which, were they answered truthfully, would probably cause the aircraft to be impounded and the operation brought to an abrupt conclusion. By using the spare accommodation in the cabin, space not required for food and equipment which they would have to take with them, it would be possible to carry a fair quantity of fuel over and above that in the tanks, and provided no unforeseen circumstance arose, demanding extensive journeys, this might be sufficient for their purpose, although it would leave a margin smaller than was compatible with safety. Anyhow, it was all they could do. If they ran out of petrol and oil, Biggles declared, they would have to think out some sort of story to satisfy the authorities when they asked for more.

Weapons were another problem. Strictly speaking, any arms carried would have to be declared on their arrival at any overseas airport, in which case they would probably be confiscated ; yet, considering what they knew about the Valley of Paradise, and the nature of the undertaking generally, it seemed the height of madness to go without weapons of some sort. The difficulty was overcome by cutting a small secret compartment in a bulkhead, a cavity large enough to hold four automatics and a small supply of ammunition. Biggles didn't like the idea of doing this even though his conscience was satisfied that he was justified ; but there was no alternative.

Just what would happen when they reached America was not easy to foresee. There would be no difficulty about refuelling at Dakar

because their papers would declare Buenos Aires to be their destination—which, in fact, it was, after their real business had been transacted. But whether they would be able to slip away into the interior without causing comment was an open question. If everything went smoothly the machine need not be absent from civilisation for more than a day or two, and that could be explained away by arranging for engine trouble en route. But if they were absent for any length of time the aircraft would most certainly be posted "missing," in which case the limelight would be turned on the expedition with embarrassing results. The Air Commodore had insisted, and Biggles had agreed as far as it was in his power to do so, that anything in the nature of an official inquiry must be avoided at all costs.

The outcome of all this planning was that a week after Biggles had heard Linton's story, the Navigator had made its landfall at Natal. Having refuelled it left again almost at once, ostensibly bound for Buenos Aires via Rio de Janeiro. What Biggles actually did was, to take the aircraft out to sea a matter of twenty miles, climb to twelve thousand feet, and then, some distance south of Rio, turn due west, timing his crossing of the coast to occur about two hours before dawn. By this simple ruse he hoped to avoid observation. Later, just as dawn was breaking, having circled for some minutes in order to study the forbidding terrain below, he glided down to an anxious landing on a broad river which his chart told him was the Parana, some four hundred miles from the coast and about a hundred from the estimated position of the valley which was their ultimate objective. The nature of the river, at this point, was something that he had to take on chance. No detailed information about it was available. He had tried to get into the country and find



a reasonably safe mooring without having been observed, and he could only hope that he had succeeded. No amount of planning could do more. At all events, they were "in" and for the moment that was enough.

As the cockpit cover slid back Biggles raised himself up and subjected the landscape—or what could be seen of it—to a thoughtful scrutiny, an occupation in which he was presently joined by Ginger, who had

been sitting next to him.

"Well, this is it," remarked Biggles. "I think we've struck lucky. If every aircraft in South America turned out to look for us we should take a bit of finding."

"You're right there," agreed Ginger warmly, regarding the scenery without emotion.

Not by any stretch of the imagination could it be called beautiful, although it was not without a certain fascination of its own. The general effect was depressing. Here was "

nature in the raw," where the vegetable was king. Only the broad black stream moved, and that with sluggish reluctance. On each side of it every form of plant life seemed to be engaged in a struggle for existence, striving always to reach the light. Right down to the waters edge great trees rose shoulder to shoulder from a tangled mass of undergrowth.

For the most part the leathery leaves showed green against a solid background of shadow, although here and there the graceful fronds of a tree-fern, or a cluster of brilliant flowers, stood out in sharp relief. Lianas wound round every trunk and bough, passing from tree to tree to form a great network of cables. Raucous cries of birds could be heard far above, in the towering crowns of the trees, but few could be seen. Humming birds, and an occasional gorgeous butterfly, using the river for a highway, were the only living things that moved. Apart from these the brooding forest yielded no secrets. It gave no sign, either of welcome or resentment. It merely seemed to watch, confident of its strength, the noisy, busy, impudent intruders of its domain.

"Let's get ashore and stretch our legs," suggested Biggles. "I think there's enough water for us to make fast to the bank. If everything is all right, and it seems to be, we might make this our base. There's plenty of room to get off again should we have to. According to my reckoning we're within easy striking distance of this alleged paradise. It shouldn't be more than a hundred miles or so, and that's near enough for our immediate purpose. Okay everybody ; let's get cracking."

In an hour the machine was snug against the bank, its tanks topped up from the reserve supply of petrol that had been carried in the cabin. A small area of undergrowth had been cleared to permit the erection of a camouflaged bell tent ; in it, food, fuel and equipment not urgently

required had been stored. From a frying-pan balanced precariously on a Primus stove, tended by Bertie, arose the appetising aroma of sausages and bacon. Tea had already been made, Ginger, with his jack knife, carved a loaf of bread into hunks.

"You know, old boy, if it wasn't for the beastly bugs and what-nots this wouldn't be a bad spot—no, by Jove, not bad at all," observed Bertie, making a swipe at a wasp before impaling a sausage with a neat thrust.

"A lot of other people have made the same remark," replied Biggles, examining the ground carefully before sitting down. "Unfortunately, no one has yet thought of a way of liquidating the pests."

"Everything that walks, crawls, flies, or swims, seems to be permanently hungry," put in Ginger.

"I'm feeling a bit that way myself," averred Bertie, reaching for another sausage. "

Nibbling chocolate in an aircraft is no meal for a grown-up man, by gad."

After this there was silence for a while, for all were hungry after the long flight.

"This place seems all right ; we might as well make it our dump," said Biggles presently.

"From what I remember of it from topsides it won't be an easy place to find," asserted Algy. "Did you notice any landmarks ? "

"No," admitted Biggles. "This infernal forest is all alike. We shall have to fix in our mind's eye a picture of this particular stretch of the river. But somebody will usually be here and at a pinch could light a smoke fire."

The meal finished and the remains tidied up, Biggles lit a cigarette and called a final conference.

"First of all, let's be quite clear about why we're here," he began. "Our primary object is to get Angus out of this mess he's fallen into. Our first job, then, will be to find out if he's still alive. If he is, the next thing will be to get him away. That may not be easy if he's down with fever. If this scheming doctor has had all his money we'll make him cough it up. If he kicks at that we'll take it from him, bearing in mind

that he got it by false pretences. This little show is costing us a packet of money anyway so I don't feel inclined to let Liebgarten get away with it. Those are the main targets. A complication is likely to be the other people here, but if there are still any British among them who want to go home we shan't very well be able to leave them behind. That goes for everybody, up to a point, although we shall have to be a bit more careful about handling foreigners. Some may want to stay ; if so, that's okay with us. Common humanity demands that this place is given a thorough spring-cleaning, but it is not really for us to do it. As far as Angus is concerned it is of course a personal matter. With the others—well, we can expose the racket, and leave it to the respective governments to take care of their own nationals."

"You're not thinking of hauling Leibgarten out and handing him over to the authorities ?

"queried Algy.

"Certainly not," returned Biggles without hesitation. "We might tell him what we think of him, but we've absolutely no right to interfere with a man on his own ground, on the territory of a friendly nation, whether it's Argentina, Bolivia or Paraguay. That's their affair, although no doubt if the racket is exposed they'll do something about it. As it is, I'

m quite sure they have no

idea what's going on or they wouldn't tolerate it. But if this fellow Liebgarten is to all intents and purposes a respectable citizen, one who has bought his land and pays his taxes, it might be difficult to make a case against him. He might well argue that his colony idea was a perfectly genuine one, genuine and practicable ; if the people haven't the guts, the ability or the capital, to put the thing over, that's not his responsibility—and there would be a certain amount of truth in that. Maybe the fellow is trying to turn the place into a little paradise—or that may have been his intention when he started. That it hasn't panned out as he hoped was due to circumstances beyond his control. Other people have made similar experiments, but almost without exception they have ended in failure.

Liebgarten may be a plain downright crook. On the other hand he may be merely a crank, and while cranks are dangerous people to have anything to do with they are not necessarily criminals. But no doubt we shall be able to satisfy ourselves as to what he really is when we've had a word with him."

Ginger looked up. "Do I understand from that remark that you are going to call on him ? "

"What else ? I'm not going to crawl into the place like a housebreaker, or crash into it like a commando. It's always a good thing to keep an open mind until you have something tangible to work on. After all, while I do not doubt it, we have only Linton's word for it that people are being detained in the valley because they have no means of getting out. They went in of their own free will —don't lose sight of that. In a court of law Liebgarten could argue, perhaps with some justification, that these accounts of pressure being brought to bear to keep the people there were just vindictive lies. He could also say, apparently with perfect truth, that anyone who didn't like the place was at liberty to walk out. Even Linton admitted that the man has never been known to use force. If the witnesses were challenged with that in court, unless they committed perjury, the doctor would win his case. As I see it, if Liebgarten does not use force, then neither can we. Put it like this. If we barged into the doctor's house with guns in our hands, demanding this and that, with no better excuse than the unsubstantiated word of one man, we should certainly be in the wrong. We might find ourselves in jail, not the doctor.

No, the only proper course is for me to have a word with Liebgarten to see how he shapes. If he starts any funny stuff—well, we can show him that two can play at that game. Another point we ought to keep in mind is this. Conditions may have changed since Linton was there. It shouldn't take us long to satisfy ourselves about that. Ginger can come with me when I go in case a witness is needed. You, Algy, and Bertie, can stick around here, in reserve, so to speak. I shall say nothing about you being with us. We shall apparently be on our own. Nor shall I say anything about having an aircraft in the offing. If Liebgarten wonders how we got to the place—well, it might be a good thing if he did a spot of wondering, for a change."

"When are you thinking of going ? "asked Algy.

Biggles considered the question. "I think we might as well start right away," he decided.

"There doesn't seem to be any point in hanging about. The sooner I've seen the doctor the sooner shall I be able to form an opinion as to the true state of affairs. Bertie, for the moment you'd better take care of things here. Algy can fly Ginger and me over and put us down within easy distance of the valley. That, I imagine, will mean a landing on the river that runs through the colony—the Polito. Having put us

down you will wait for us to come back. Of course, we've got to locate the place first, and that will have to be done from the air. We might spend the rest of our lives looking for it from ground level."

"But if we go anywhere near the place in daylight the aircraft will be seen," Ginger pointed out.

"Yes, I must admit that there is a chance of that," replied Biggles. "If what Linton said about natives was true there will be eyes in the forest as well as in the colony.

But there is this about it. If an aircraft is reported, or even if the doctor himself spotted us, he would not necessarily connect it with visitors. Ours is not the only machine in South America. I don't suppose many machines, military or civil, come this way very often, but it could happen once in a while if an aircraft got off its course. Being seen in the air, therefore, needn't necessarily upset our plans. It would be a different matter altogether if it was spotted on the ground or on the river. In that case the doctor could hardly fail to be suspicious. But it's a chance we shall have to take. We've got no other means of transport, anyway, and I'm not likely to try walking a hundred miles through this confounded jungle. I haven't much time for walking in any circumstances, but in this stuff it's plain purgatory. I know—I've had some ; and so have you, if it comes to that."

Biggles rose. "I don't think there's any more to say so we might as well move off."

Followed by the others he walked down the bank to the aircraft.

"You want me to wait for you just where I put you down ? "questioned Algy.

"That's the idea."

"What do I do if you don't come back ? "

"Don't be in too great a hurry to do anything. Give us, say, until five o'clock. That should give you time to get home in daylight. If we don't show up by five go back to Bertie. In the morning both of you had better come over as soon after dawn as you can manage.

You may find us waiting. If we aren't there, one of you can stay with the machine while the other has a look round to find out what happened to us."

"Good enough," agreed Algy. "I thought I'd better get that clear."

Biggles took the automatics and some clips of cartridges from their locker and distributed them. "Keep these out of sight unless they're needed," he advised.

With Bertie watching from the bank the others then entered the aircraft. The flying-boat was cast off and allowed to drift out into the stream. The engines came to life, and after churning the water into foam the machine took off on its reconnaissance.

III

PARADISE VALLEY

THE run to the supposed position of the valley would occupy, Biggles estimated, about half an hour, assuming that Algy's navigation had been correct and Linton had not been mistaken over the locality. Linton's instructions for finding the place had of necessity been vague, because he himself could not have known to within fifty miles where he was going. True, he had crossed a desert ; but one desert is much like another. Tropical forests vary little. The only conspicuous landmark was the Polito River, which ran through Paradise Valley, but here again, in countries where big rivers are common there is little to choose between them. However, as the Polito was of exceptional size, and ran practically from north to south, Biggles was fairly confident of identifying it when he saw it, as he could not fail to do if he maintained a westerly course.

The matter was discussed in the cockpit. Ginger, looking down on the forest, which rolled away to the horizon on every side, was by no means happy about it. Never, he thought moodily, was better demonstrated a remark Biggles often made, that it is one thing to look at a map, but another thing altogether to look at the actual country it represents. He did not even know what country they were flying over. It might be any one of three, and to talk of boundaries in such a jungle was manifestly absurd.

However, in twenty-five minutes by the clock in the instrument panel a wide river came into view ahead. On Biggles' instructions, Algy, who was at the controls, cruising at two thousand feet, held straight on towards it.

Biggles spoke to Ginger. "That must be the Polito," he asserted. "The map doesn't show any other river of that size hereabouts. The question is, is the valley upstream or down, from the point where we shall

strike it ? I imagine the only way to answer that question is by trial and error. I'm inclined to think, from where we crossed the coast, that we may be a little south of the objective, if anything, so we'll try upstream first."

This, in the event, proved to be correct, and in point of fact the objective was located with less trouble than Biggles expected.

On reaching the river Algy turned right, that is, upstream, and before ten minutes had elapsed, Ginger, gazing ahead, saw a physical feature which he suspected at once must be the one they sought. It was a valley, yet not so much a valley as he had visualised, or what is generally meant by the word. There were no high steep banks. Rather was it a long, shallow depression, bounded by high land in the distance, with the river flowing through the middle. Focussing his eyes on the place as they approached he could make out a number of what appeared to be hen houses scattered more or less throughout the entire length of the valley, giving the district the appearance of an extensive poultry farm, or a series of allotments with the usual ramshackle tool sheds. Aware that no one would start either a poultry farm or allotments so far from any possible market he could only conclude that this was the vaunted Paradise Valley, although there was certainly nothing about the place to warrant a title so extravagant. He touched Biggles on the arm.

"Okay, I've seen it," said Biggles. "All right, Algy ; you're close enough. Throttle back a bit and turn her round."

Algy complied, and the Navigator was soon flying back over its course gently losing height.

Biggles surveyed the water below intently for a suitable landing site. There were, in fact, several likely looking places—or so they appeared from the air. The problem was to choose the one best suited to their purpose.

They were down to a couple of hundred feet before Biggles suddenly made up his mind.

He pointed ahead to a stretch of water apparently free from obstructions. "Try there," he told Algy. "If, when you get close, you see anything likely to cause trouble, take her up again."

Algy nodded to show that he kept pace with the situation.

The only obstruction that revealed itself, and this was at the last

moment, was what everyone took to be a log that suddenly appeared from nowhere, as the saying is, directly in the path of the machine. It brought from Biggles an exclamation of alarm and caused Algy to stiffen. But, as if it saw what was bearing down on it the supposed log came to life and dived.

"Croc," muttered Biggles laconically. "I've never hit one, landing or taking off, but I've always had a feeling that it wouldn't do the keel any good."

The aircraft passed over the spot vacated by the crocodile and presently ran to a standstill on a sheet of water not unlike that from which it had taken off.

"Take her over to the right bank," ordered Biggles.

Again Algy obeyed; and a minute later the Navigator slid smoothly beneath overhanging trees to bump its nose gently on a fern-covered bank.

"Nicely," complimented Biggles. "I doubt if we should have found anything better. I reckon we are about three miles from the nearest farm—if those huts we saw are called farms. I don't think I'd tie up, Algy. In fact, after we've gone ashore I'd feel inclined to let her drift a yard or two from the bank, in case some of these hostile Indians crept up on you and tried to get aboard." He looked up and down the river, listening at the same time

; but there was no movement anywhere, and the only sound was the distant chattering of monkeys and the clamour of birds far overhead. Satisfied with his inspection he jumped lightly on the bank. Ginger followed.

"See you later," Biggles told Algy. "We'll be as quick as we can, but we may be some time. Don't get in a flap

if we don't come back at all tonight. In that case try again in the morning as soon as it's light enough to see to get off." Turning, he forced a way through the luxuriant undergrowth to the highest part of the bank. Reaching it, he pulled up short, glancing quickly to left and right. He looked at Ginger and made a grimace.

Ginger knew what he meant. A path—it was really no more than a faint track—ran parallel with the river.

"I don't like that," murmured Biggles. "It's handy in one way ; it'll make travelling a lot easier ; but it can only mean that someone comes along here pretty often. If we shifted the aircraft upstream or down we should probably find the same trail. Of course, it may be only a game track. There's one thing we might do, though." He turned round and spoke again to Algy. "There's a path here," he said. "Take the machine over to the other bank and wait there. Do what you can in the way of camouflage."

Algy waved to show that he understood, whereupon Biggles returned to Ginger.

"What happens if we run into a bunch of these natives Linton spoke about ? " questioned Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. "We should always have that risk no matter which way we approached the valley," he commented. "We shall have to chance it. We don't want any trouble if it can be avoided, but you'd better have your gun handy. I'm not standing for any nonsense.

"

"I wouldn't call poisoned darts and arrows exactly nonsense," remarked Ginger.

Biggles changed the subject. He looked at his wrist watch. "Half-past ten," he announced. "We've plenty of time." Taking the lead he walked on along the bank.

"I don't think this track can be used very often," observed Ginger, after a while.

"If it wasn't used it wouldn't be here," replied Biggles. "The jungle would swallow it in a month. It may interest you to know that Indians use it, anyway. I've seen bare footprints in the muddy places. I imagine this is the usual way the natives Linton spoke about come when they want to see Liebgarten. Any one trying to escape would also have to use the path for the simple reason that progress through the jungle would be practically impossible without proper cutting tools."

They went on, sometimes, when the path took a turn, stopping to reconnoitre and listen.

The going was neither easy nor pleasant, for the undergrowth was soaking wet. The ground a slippery mixture of mud and slime and the

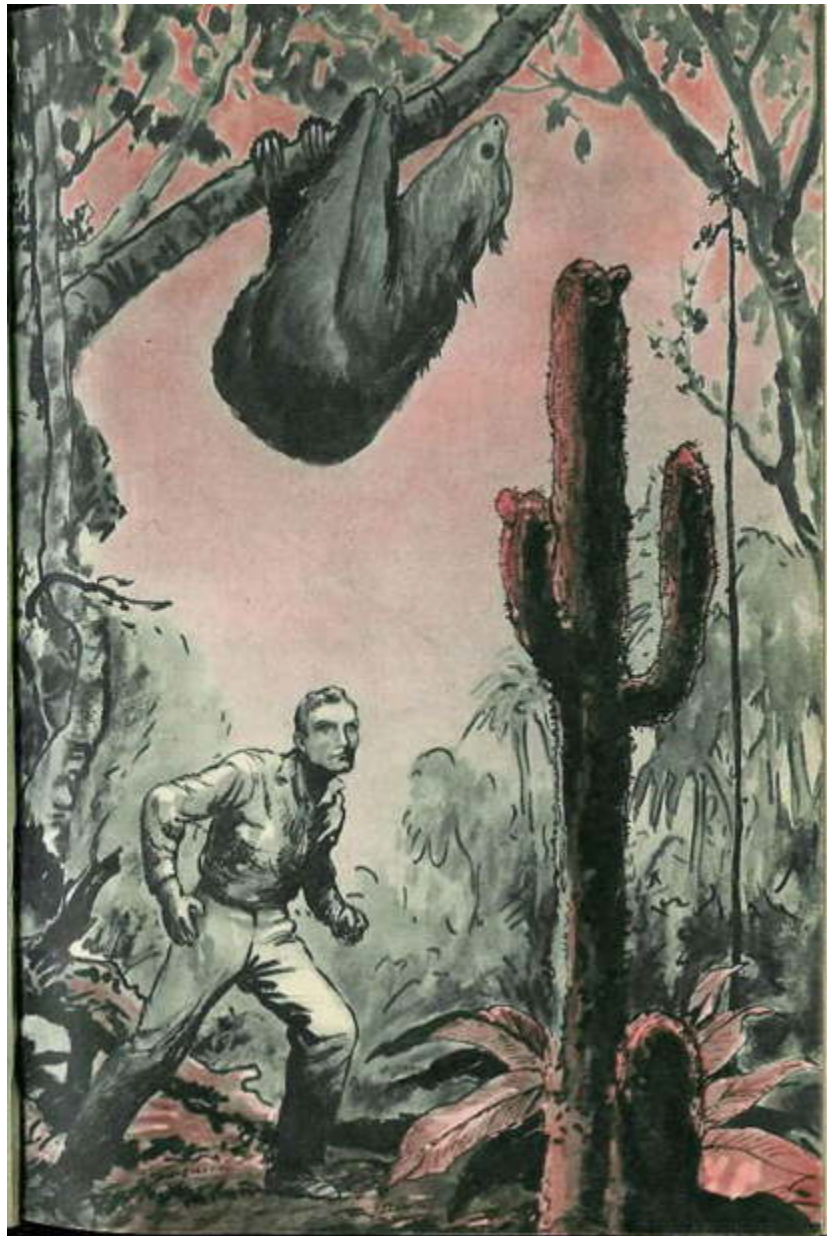
atmosphere that of a turkish bath.

Ginger sweated copiously. Nowhere yet was there anything remotely suggestive of paradise, according to the popular idea of it. The river on their right was opaque and dirty brown in colour as if there had been recent rain. The jungle which hemmed it in had an aloof, savage aspect ; an impenetrable roof of leaves overhead and a chaotic tangle of lianas on either hand. There was practically no sign of life—an occasional heron sitting with hunched shoulders on a sandbank or on the skeleton of a dead tree overhanging the water, across which butterflies of brilliant hue passed and repassed. Once Biggles stopped dead, and his hand went to his hip pocket as he peered into the branches of a tree to the left, whence came a suspicious rustle ; but it was only a three-toed sloth, moving with all the time in the world to spare from tree to tree. Far overhead parrots kept up a continual argument.

These conditions persisted for what Ginger judged to be a good two miles ; then, for no reason that could be discovered, the jungle broke down to open savannah, comprising for the most part stiff grass, waist high, broken here and there with growths of monstrous cacti. Across this the path continued, becoming all the time more plain to see. Far away to the left, rising ground indicated that they were entering the southern extremity of the valley.

Another mile and they came upon the first sign of human occupation. It was an abandoned hut, half swamped by the ever conquering vegetation—a dismal picture.

Biggles glanced at it in passing but did not stop. A few hundred yards farther on they



came to another, similar structure,

but not so dilapidated, although, to be sure, it was crude enough. Only a wisp of smoke curling sluggishly from the roof indicated that it was occupied. Around it a blackened area showed where the grass had been burned off.

At the far side of this a man was making a futile effort to cultivate the

soil with a tool like a garden fork with the tines bent over at right angles. He worked slowly and with effort, first driving the points of the fork into the ground and then hanging back to uproot a clod. At the mere sight of such toil in such an atmosphere Ginger perspired more freely. His eyes clouded with sympathy. What the labourer's nationality might be there was as yet no means of discovering, for a wide-brimmed hat covered his head and shoulders and the rest of his clothes were in rags. As they drew nearer, however, it became possible to see that he was a white man, thin to the point of emaciation. His movements were automatic, mechanical ; there was no real strength behind them. He looked up and stopped work when he heard them coming, but his face showed no sign of animation or emotion.

At a distance of ten paces Biggles` called a greeting in English.

Upon this the man's lack-lustre eyes brightened a little.

"Hello, where have you come from ? "he returned in the same language.

"We've just arrived," Biggles told him.

"God help you," replied the man simply, wiping his face with a dirty rag held in a trembling hand.

Biggles drew nearer. He looked at the red, calcined earth which the man had exposed, at his crude instrument, and then at the man himself. "What are you trying to do ? " he inquired curiously.

"What does it look like ? "returned the digger, sarcasm creeping into his voice.

"I don't know—that's why I asked," answered Biggles patiently.

"If you really want to know I'm trying to cultivate my farm," said the man. His face twisted in a ghastly grin. "That's what you'll be doing presently."

Biggles shook his head. "You couldn't be more wrong," he murmured. "I'm nothing for digging. Tell me, what's your name ? "

"Clarke—Joe Clarke, Chief Petty Officer, R.N. That was me before I was daft enough to get myself demobbed and come to this hell-hole."

"I gather you don't like it here ? "

"Can you see anything about it to like ? "

"Nothing," admitted Biggles. "But if you don't like it why do you stay ?
"

"You'll find out—and that won't take long." Clarke straightened his back with an effort.

"Have a gasper ? " Biggles offered his cigarette case.

Joe Clarke took a cigarette and examined it with affected curiosity. "It's a long time since I saw one of these," he muttered.

Biggles flicked his lighter and held out the flame. "Tell me, Joe, how long have you been here ? "

"Three years and a bit."

"Ever meet a fellow by the name of Linton ? "

"Linton . . . let me see now." Clarke stared at the sky, passing a grimy hand across his forehead as if thinking was an effort. "So many come and go it's a job to remember them all," he explained apologetically. "Yes, I remember the chap now—dark, well-built type

; brushed his hair straight back."

"That's him."

Clarke shook his head sadly. "If I remember right the golliwogs got him—so we were told at the time."

" Golliwogs ? "

"That's what we call those dirty little rats who live in the jungle. They ain't human."

Biggles nodded. "I get it. Listen. Linton came here with a friend, a chap named Angus Mackail. Does that name mean anything to you ? "

"Oh yes," replied Joe without hesitation. "I've heard of him—saw him once or twice, not lately though, because I've been sick and didn't often get as far as the colony. We prefer to muck along here on our own."

" We ? "

"Me and the missus."

Biggles stared. He glanced at the hut. "D'you mean you've got your wife here ? "

"Yes, I brought her here—God forgive me."

Biggles shook his head sadly. "So you don't know for certain if Mackail is still alive ? "

he prompted.

"No. They die so fast it's hard to keep track. But if Mackail is still on top of the ground he'll be down the far end of the valley."

"How far is that from here ? "

"Couple of miles, maybe."

"They tell me a bloke named Liebgarten runs this show ? "

"That's right."

"Where does he hang out ? "

"About the middle of the valley, down closer to the river." Joe's brow puckered in a frown. "But how did you get here without seeing him ? He sees everybody."

"He'll see us, too, before we leave," asserted Biggles in a hard voice.

"Didn't you come on the boat ? "

Biggles exhaled smoke. "Not the one you came on." "And what do you reckon you're going to do now you're here ? "

"Well, before I do anything else I'm going to find Mackail, who happens to be a friend of mine." Biggles looked Joe straight in the face. "Can you keep your mouth shut ? "

"Not much reason for opening it here."

"Very well, then. The golliwogs didn't get Linton. He got away. He died later from what he picked up on the trip ; but before he died he gave me a rough idea of what was going on here."

Joe's eyes opened wide. " Cripes 1 That is news. A lot of people have

tried to get out but he must have been the first to get away with it. But you watch what you're 1::)

to. You've got in, but you may not find it so easy to get out."

"Who's going to stop me?"

"Liebgarten will."

Biggles smiled faintly. "I don't think so. Anyway, I understand he never uses force?"

"He's never had any need to. He's got everybody where he wants 'em."

"But not me, Joe. From what you say I gather you'd get out if you could?"

"I'd had enough of the place, and more than enough, before I'd been here a week."

"Got any money left?"

"Not a cent."

"How much did you bring with you?"

"Five hundred and twenty quid. Some of it was part of my pension, and some of it was what the missus saved while I was at sea."

Biggles nodded. "We'll see what we can do about it," he promised. "Don't work too hard—you're wasting your time. You'll be seeing me again, when I've got things straightened out with Liebgarten."

"Watch he doesn't straighten you out. Hitler was an innocent little lamb compared with that lily-fingered rat." "What is he—German?"

"Nobody seems to know for sure, but I reckon that's what he is. One of them die-hard Nazis is my guess."

"Okay. Here, have a few cigarettes to go on with." Biggles half emptied his case into Joe's

willful palm. "We'll be seeing you. So long."

Biggles walked on. "From what I can see of it Linton didn't exaggerate," he told Ginger quietly. "Every word Joe Clarke just said bears out his story. All the same, I'm still puzzled about Liebgarten. In

order to exile his wretched victims the man has to exile himself, and I'm dashed if I can see the point of it. I could understand him spending a year here, or even two, if he was making a lot of money ; but he behaves as though he intended staying here all his life. Well, we shall soon know the answer."

They glanced into Clarke's house in passing. His wife was not to be seen, but they could hear her in the other room, for there were only two. One look at the miserable spectacle of squalor the interior presented and Biggles hurried on.

As they proceeded the track gradually became a more definite path, with " farms "

similar to the one on which Clarke had been working becoming more frequent. For the most part they were some distance from the track, so Biggles did not stop to investigate.

Once they were accosted by some children, apparently members of the same family. All were clad in rags, and looked ill, their skins yellow with jaundice and eyes bloodshot from recurrent fever. They spoke only Italian, and Biggles' frown deepened as he strode on. "Fancy letting kids get in that state," he muttered. "Valley of Paradise, eh ? I'm beginning to look forward to my meeting with this precious doctor. By that time I shall have found a more appropriate name for the place."

Very soon two large huts came into view. Except that they were constructed of rough timber they were not unlike abandoned army hutments. Some distance beyond them, at a spot perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a number of men were at work, in a rough line, using tools similar to the one employed by Joe Clarke. A little cloud of red dust hung over them. One man, in a white suit, stood a little apart, watching. Near him a boy was holding a tired-looking pony.

"I wonder if by any chance that's Liebgarten ? " said Biggles, pulling up and shading his eyes with a hand.

" Could be," replied Ginger pensively. " He isn't exactly exhausting himself with hard labour."

"Angus might be among those fellows. Let's go over." "Aren't you taking a bit of a chance ? " queried Ginger. "Chance of what ? "inquired Biggles curtly.

"Starting a rough house with Liebgarten."

"If he wants one he can have it. As I feel at the moment that would suit me as well as anything."

"Linton said something about him having a bodyguard of thugs."

"So what ? " Biggles strode on.

In a few minutes it became obvious that the overseer, or whatever office the idle man filled, was not the Doctor. He was a black man. The pony boy called his attention to the newcomers, whereupon he turned and subjected them to a prolonged stare, at the end of which he walked slowly to meet them. The men working did not look up.

The black spoke first. He took up a position between Biggles and the workmen, feet apart, hands on his hips. In one hand he carried a riding crop. "What do you want ? "he demanded.

"It's all right, I'm looking for somebody," said Biggles evenly, and would have passed on, but the black sidestepped into his path.

"You want somebody, huh ? "he asked insolently. "Yes, and it isn't you," returned Biggles coldly. The black did not move.

Biggles regarded him with eyes that had narrowed a trifle. "I said I was looking for somebody," he said, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Have you any objection ? "

The negro seemed puzzled by Biggles' behaviour. "Have you seen the Doctor ? "

"Not yet," replied Biggles curtly. "I'm reserving that pleasure for a little later, after I've found the man I'm looking for and have heard what he has to say."

"What man you want, huh ? "

"Mackail is the name—Angus Mackail."

"Not here."

"I'll satisfy myself about that." With a quick movement of his arm Biggles thrust the negro aside and strode on.

"Angus I" he called. "Are you there, Angus ? "

The working men, there were nine of them, stopped in

their task and turned ; and such was their condition that Ginger was by no means sure that he would have recognised Angus had he been there. Never had he seen such pathetic, dejected specimens of humanity. All were thin and hollow-faced with starvation or fever, or both. Unkempt, unshaven, clad in the flimsiest rags, their faces streaked where the dust had mingled with sweat, they reminded him of nothing so much as refugees he had once seen from a Nazi labour camp. It was impossible to guess their ages, or nationalities. Some shook with ague. None was fit for work, much less undertake the long and difficult journey to freedom. Ginger began to understand more clearly why they stayed.

"Angus isn't here," Biggles told him in a quiet aside. Then speaking loudly he went on "

Are there any Britishers here ? "

Two men raised hands.

"Do you want to stay here ? "

"Do we look as though we like it ? "sneered one of the men.

"Okay. Take it easy. That's all I wanted to know," answered Biggles. "I'll be back." He turned away, and a curious smile crossed his face as his eyes settled on the black, now riding away on the pony. He was making for a spot where a group of trees cut into the skyline.

Ginger also looked at the retreating horseman. "I have an idea you've started something,"

he observed.

"I'm going to, anyway, before I leave this dump, you can bet your shirt on that," retorted Biggles grimly. "Come on, that's the way we go." He pointed in the direction taken by the rider.

"Where do you suppose he's going ? " queried Ginger. "The same place as we're going,"

returned Biggles briefly. "To see his boss, Doctor Liebgarten."

IV

STRANGE ENCOUNTER

BIGGLES and Ginger were still some distance short of the trees into

which the black had ridden when they saw him reappear, leading his pony, accompanied by a tail man in a white suit wearing a sunhelmet.

"Here, I should say, comes the Doctor," remarked Biggles.

As they walked on towards the pair the negro swung into his saddle and trotted off, riding along the edge of the trees in a direction which, Ginger thought, was parallel with the river. The man whom Biggles surmised to be the owner of the estate came on towards them, carelessly swinging a light cane walking-stick.

"You know, there's something phoney about this setup," declared Ginger. He indicated the number of men who were moving about the scattered huts, at no great distance on either side, engaged in one task or another. "If all these people hate the sight of Liebgarten, as they must, if they want to get away and he won't let them go, why the dickens don't they set about him and take what they want ? But no Here he is, strolling about without an escort as if he was lord of the blooming manor. I don't get it."

"Linton said that the doctor had everyone nicely tamed," reminded Biggles. "That's how he runs the place."

"Would he make a pet dog out of you, always ready to eat out of his hand ? "

"I shouldn't like to think so, but it's no use blinking at what we can see for ourselves,"

answered Biggles. "There must be something remarkable about the man or he wouldn't get away with this."

"Do you believe in this plausible tongue theory, and alleged hypnotic influence ? "

"A plausible tongue will take a man a long way, although there must be a limit,"

answered Biggles thoughtfully. "As far as the mesmerism stuff goes, a man of strong personality can undoubtedly influence people with less brain. If that were not so there would be no dictators. Nor would there be any confidence tricksters, which we know there are, to empty the pockets of people foolish enough to listen to them."

"Are you suggesting that all the people here are feeble-minded ? Some may be, but surely not all. What about Angus, for example ? "

"They might not have been feeble-minded when they arrived, but a few months in this climate, on a starvation diet and periodical doses of fever, would certainly reduce their vitality. Besides, no man readily abandons a concern in which he has sunk all his money.

We can take it for certain that this fellow Liebgarten has something about him that the others haven't got, otherwise the racket wouldn't have lasted as long as it has. But that's enough. We don't want him to hear us discussing the thing. What he's wondering is, how we got here and how much we know."

"Are you going to tell him ? "

"Not likely—not yet, anyway."

During this conversation they had been drawing nearer to the man who was the subject of it. He was now only a short distance away, and Ginger regarded him with no small interest. Linton's description had been fairly accurate. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, who in his younger days must have had the stature of an athlete ; but the contours, both of his face and figure, were now a little too rounded, as was only to be expected in a man approaching his sixtieth year. Still, it was obvious that whoever else in the valley went short of food, the Doctor did not. He was immaculately dressed, even to white gloves.

"He doesn't look like a crook," breathed Ginger. "Crooks seldom do," murmured Biggles drily.

When Liebgarten called a greeting it was in the cultured, well-modulated voice of a man of education. There was just a trace of foreign accent, but sufficient to suggest that his nationality was not British by birth.

"Good morning ! " he hailed cheerfully. "Can I be of assistance to you ? "

"I'm looking for Doctor Liebgarten," answered Biggles. "You are speaking to him now."

"Good. I was hoping to meet you," said Biggles evenly.

"The pleasure is entirely mine," was the reply, in a voice which Ginger thought was a little too suave. "But let us not stand here in the sun—it's hot in these parts at midday, as you may have noticed," went on the Doctor. "Come into my house and allow me to offer you some hospitality. You are thirsty no doubt, and perhaps tired, after your

journey "

"What journey ? "inquired Biggles vaguely.

"The journey you must have made to get here." " Ah--of course."

The Doctor smiled, and in doing so revealed something Linton had mentioned but which Ginger had forgotten—his teeth. They flashed with a metallic sheen. The effect was startling, if not actually sinister. Ginger also noticed something else, something that had not been evident at a distance. It was the Doctor's eyes. The colour was a curious shade of dark blue ; but it was not only that ; in some strange way—for they were not crossed—it was hard to tell just where they were looking. Ginger could not have said whether the man was looking at him, at Biggles, or at the landscape beyond them.

"Well, that's very kind of you," rejoined Biggles. " I will certainly avail myself of your generosity."

"Don't mention it, my dear sir. This way." The Doctor bowed slightly, and with rather studied politeness indicated with his cane an open gate in the trees.

They all walked towards it, Ginger feeling a trifle foolish, for this was not the reception he had expected.

"Have you travelled far today ? "questioned the Doctor, carelessly, as if the matter was of no real importance. "A fair distance," was Biggles'

non-committal reply. "You had a fatiguing journey no doubt ? "

"Not too bad."

"You came by boat, of course ? "

"A boat of sorts."

"You tied it up securely, I hope, and in a safe place ? The river is subject to spates you know, and it might get carried away. Where did you leave it ? "

"Down the river."

"Will it be there long ? "

"Not very long, I hope."

"But it is available ? "

"It will come back for me when I'm ready to go," explained Biggles.

"I see. You were not molested on the way ? There are some rather unpleasant tribes of Indians, primitive little creatures, in the forest."

"They didn't interfere with us, anyway," said Biggles nonchalantly. "In my experience people seldom trouble you unless you trouble them, and that goes for natives."

"Yes, I think you are right," conceded the Doctor.

By this time they were passing through the open gate, and Ginger, without making his interest conspicuous, took good stock of his surroundings. There was not much to see.

The most noteworthy features was the hedge through which the gate was apparently the only way. It comprised the most ferocious looking cacti he had ever seen, and was not less than ten feet thick. A military barbed wire entanglement could not have been more effective had it been designed to keep people inside, or out. But after a few steps they emerged into a sylvan scene so delightful that it was hard to believe it could occur in the same district as the wilderness outside. It might have been a section of English parkland had it not been for the flamboyant tropical plants and shrubs that broke the vista. There were fruit trees, too, some of the commoner sorts, and others unknown to Ginger, who surveyed the scene with astonishment. The grounds were not large ; they embraced not more than three acres, for a guess. In the centre stood a white-painted house of some size, built in the style popular at the time of the early Spanish settlers in South America.

There was another building some distance beyond, but just what it was could not easily be determined on account of intervening trees and shrubs. The owner offered no explanation. On the lawn in front of the house a black panther lay luxuriating in the hot sunshine like a contented cat. At the top of the steps which gave access to the front door there was a stand from which two macaws of incredibly beautiful colours watched the approach of the visitors with suspicious eyes. As the party neared the panther Ginger instinctively edged away a little until the Doctor, with a smile, told him that there was no danger. The animal was on a chain. "Elizabeth, that's her name, is quite friendly with those whom she knows," said the Doctor. "I wouldn't care to trust her with strangers, though. Like all her tribe, her apparent docility is only skin deep."

Biggles said nothing as their host led the way up a broad flight of steps to the front door.

The windows of the house, Ginger noticed in passing, were protected with the customary Spanish wrought-iron grilles.

He was not surprised to find the interior of the house in keeping with the imposing exterior. The hall was furnished in simple yet impressive style, some fine old mahogany being much in evidence. Everything was beautifully kept, as if tended by a well-trained staff. A huge white vase of orchids made a spectacular display on an old polished chest which reflected their pristine beauty.

The room into which the Doctor showed them was arranged with the same taste, yet with an eye to comfort. Long cane easy-chairs gave the apartment a cosy, lived-in appearance.

A grand piano occupied a corner of the room. A massive safe occupied another.

"Please sit down and make yourselves comfortable," invited the Doctor in his courteous cultured voice. ',What can I offer you ? A glass of wine perhaps ? I have some sherry that I can recommend. Or would you prefer your national British drink, beer ? "

"So you've decided that we're British ? " murmured Biggles with a faint smile.

" Pst ! How could I be mistaken ? But may I, without appearing impertinent, ask your name ? I don't think you mentioned it."

Biggles supplied the information and introduced Ginger.

The Doctor. bowed. "Thank you. There is no need for me to introduce myself. But how about some refreshment ? "

"If you happen to have any lemons I'd like a long cold lemon squash," replied Biggles, who was, in fact, thirsty after the long walk.

"Me too, please," put in Ginger.

"You would like some ice in it ? " suggested the Doctor. "By all means, if it's available,"

returned Biggles. "Why not ? Ice is not a difficult commodity to make, and in a climate like this it's indispensable." The Doctor clapped his

hands twice.

The summons was answered by a white man, a little man with a pale complexion and a face devoid of expression. He was dressed in a white steward's uniform. The Doctor spoke to him in Spanish and he withdrew, to reappear almost at once with a silver tray on which cut glass gleamed beside a silver sugar bowl and ice tongs. Ice clinked musically in a jug beside which lay several fine lemons. The man put the tray on a low table which the Doctor had brought forward and then went out. The Doctor himself cut the lemons and squeezed the juice into the glasses.

"Please help yourself to water, or soda water if you prefer it," said he. "I will leave you to add sugar to your taste." He himself poured out a small glass of sherry from a long-necked decanter which stood with several others on a sideboard.

"You seem to do yourself very well here, if I may say so," murmured Biggles, spilling a spoonful of sugar into his glass.

"And why not ? " countered his host. "We only live once, so we might as well make the best of it."

"It struck me as I came along that the people working in the valley don't seem to be getting much out of their lives," said Biggles pointedly.

"That, my dear sir, is entirely their own fault," asserted the Doctor, with some warmth. "

In this world, what a man gets is in direct ratio with his energy and mental capacity.

Those who are satisfied with little, get little. Those who want more, strive until they get it. Unfortunately, there is an increasing tendency with some people to expect a lot for little effort. They prefer to sit back and let others do their thinking for them, and then demand a share of whatever is going. You wouldn't deny that ? "

"No, I wouldn't," agreed Biggles after a brief hesitation.

"Take these people outside as a case in point," continued the Doctor. "What each is getting is in proportion to his productive ability. The same factors apply here as in civilisation. Give a man money, goods, pleasure, for doing nothing, and he will do nothing. To get the best out of him you must deny him what he wants ; only then will he have

the industry to help himself."

Ginger looked at the speaker curiously. He spoke earnestly, almost fervently, and his argument, on the face of it, seemed sound enough. It was hard to believe that he was not sincere.

"It may be that these people expected something different when they came here," said Biggles, thoughtfully stirring his lemonade.

"I can't accept that as a basis for argument," demurred the Doctor. "A man, if he is to be successful, must be able to adapt himself to the conditions he encounters. Adaptability is as important as education—perhaps more so. When you came through my garden just now you could see for yourself what is possible here. There is no reason why the entire valley should not be made to smile in the same way."

"Is that your ambition ? "questioned Biggles.

"Of course. What else ? Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that it was my ambition when I came here. I'm beginning to get a bit despondent though."

"From which I gather that the project isn't working out quite as you planned ? "

The Doctor sighed. "How can I deny it ? What is needed here is co-operation and a whole-hearted determination to succeed. I get neither. Each thinks only of himself, hoping that the others will do the necessary work—which is, of course, a common failing in human nature. The task is not easy ; I will not pretend that it is. But then, nothing worth while is obtained easily. If it were, human endeavour would cease and progress cease with it." The Doctor's voice rose a tone in his enthusiasm. "I assure you, my dear sir, if I could get these people to put their hearts into their work, if I could induce them to expend one tenth of the energy that I do, you would soon see a big difference in the place. I even do their thinking for them. All they have to do is carry out my suggestions. Do they ? No! Some of them actually come to me with complaints, that the work is too hard, that they don't like the climate. What about me ? The climate is no kinder to me than it is to them, but I don't try to back out. As I point out to them, there is nothing to prevent me from going tomorrow, leaving them to carry on as best they can. I prefer to stay. I started the thing and I'll see it through. I may succeed yet. But good gracious, what am I doing, boring you with my difficulties ? May I ask you why I have been honoured with this visit—a visit which, I assure you, is a

welcome diversion from my daily routine."

"You may," returned Biggles frankly. "You have here a mutual friend of ours, one Angus Mackail. We would like to see him. We came for that purpose. You know him, of course

? "

"Most certainly I know him," confirmed the Doctor. "He's a very good type. Had his health not let him down he would, I am sure, have made his mark here."

"Has he been sick, then ? "

"He suffers badly from fever, as do we all, more or less. The malarial mosquito is one of the curses science has not yet been able to eradicate."

"It's pretty bad here, eh ? "

"No worse, I think, than in most tropical countries. But as in West Africa, Burma, and many other countries, it is the greatest obstacle to development. It not only lowers the constitution, but impairs the will to succeed."

"Is Mackail sick now ? "

"I don't think so. At least, he was working on his land yesterday, and doing very well with it. He has just harvested quite a good crop of grain. Would you like to see him right away ? "

"I would," said Biggles. "If you'll tell me where he is

"My dear sir, there's no need for you to exhaust yourself by walking about in the heat of the day. Besides, it's nearly lunch time. I'll send for him and he can join us here for lunch.

"

"I'd rather—" began Biggles, but the Doctor went on.

"Don't mention it. It's no trouble at all. Mackail is often here to see me." The Doctor clapped his hands again and the summons produced the same man as before. "We would like to see Mr. Mackail," he ordered. "Send for him and bring him here as soon as he arrives." As before the Doctor spoke in Spanish, a language understood by both Biggles and Ginger, so neither questioned the sincerity of the message,

which sounded as straightforward as anything could be.

Ginger glanced at Biggles, wondering what he was really thinking. For his own part, he hardly knew what to make of a situation which was developing on lines very different from what he had expected. He even found himself apologising mentally to the Doctor for suspicions which were, he thought, exaggerated, if not unfounded.

Their host turned back to them. "Your friend should be along in about half an hour," he stated. "You will take lunch with me here, I hope ? "

"If it isn't trespassing on your hospitality, thank you," answered Biggles.

"Not in the least. A visitor is always a welcome diversion. We don't have enough.

Moreover, you do not appear to have brought any provisions with you. Was that an oversight ? "

"Not exactly," replied Biggles. "We didn't expect to be here long."

"Just how long do you intend staying, if I may ask ? "

"I haven't really thought about it," returned Biggles who, like Ginger, if the truth must be told, was not a little puzzled by this reception. He smiled. "Of course, if you are going to treat us like royalty you may find that we outstay our welcome." He looked hard at the Doctor as he spoke, for it irritated him slightly when he suddenly realised that he, who had come to ask questions, had been systematically questioned, although without being downright rude he could not see how it could have been avoided. Not once had the Doctor given him an opportunity to steer the conversation into the channel he had planned. Far from that, he had been frankness itself.

"I'm afraid we haven't managed to build an hotel yet," said the Doctor, smiling and showing his unorthodox dentures. "I should be honoured if you would stay with me here for as long as you are in the valley. Stay as long as you like. I seldom have a visitor and there is no lack of accommodation."

"That's very kind of you," answered Biggles slowly. But he was thinking fast. "Do you mind if I defer my answer to the invitation until after I have seen Mackail ? "

"Not in the least, my dear sir. Why should I? Have another drink ? "

"Not at the moment, thanks. Tell me, how long do you intend to go on with this very interesting experiment ? "

" Experiment ? "

"In colonisation."

The Doctor laughed. "Of course ! For a moment I wondered what you meant. It is an experiment, I suppose.

I shall stay here until I am satisfied that the thing is, or is not, possible. Sometimes I think I have had enough ; then something happens to revive my hopes of success. I have put a lot into the place—all I have, in fact—and I dislike very much the idea of having to admit failure."

"You must have spent a lot of money," murmured Biggles.

"Not so much as you might think," answered the Doctor smoothly.

"The initial outlay was considerable, I must confess, and all my savings went into it. But it was no use half doing the thing. Actually, the financial side no longer interests me. I am concerned only with the success of the enterprise, and what that will mean to those who have helped me.

After all, what is money ? It's the curse of civilisation, although as things are organised it cannot be entirely dispensed with. If I can make the valley self-supporting, which is my ultimate goal, the question of money need not arise. I have tried to make the people here see that. At this juncture a certain amount of money is essential to keep the thing going.

Indeed, it is shortage of capital that is holding us back. With ample funds modern agricultural machinery could be acquired, and that would go far to eliminate the manual labour which is so trying in a climate such as this. Not that it is any worse here than in most places in the tropics. It is merely the lack of facilities to counteract it that makes life more tedious than it need be. Think how different it would be with an attractive clubhouse, with electric fans and other devices for keeping the air sweet and cool. Given the necessary funds, better accommodation and better transportation, this valley would soon be the envy of every city in so-called civilisation. It would be a living pattern of what could be done. People would come from far and near to see it. In fact, in a project such as this, run on cosmopolitan lines,

may be found the answer to the great problem humanity has to face—how to ensure permanent peace. But here. . . ." The Doctor made a gesture. "Forgive me. Sometimes I allow my dreams to run away with me. I only wish I could inspire some of the people here with them." The Doctor's voice ended on such a note of sadness that Ginger stared at the man. In spite of all that he knew he found it almost impossible to believe that this was all an act, put on for their benefit.

The Doctor turned to Biggles and went on. "What I really need here is an able lieutenant, someone like yourself, someone with vision and vitality, to get the thing going again, for I'm afraid I'm losing heart, and despondency is infectious. I suppose you wouldn't care to stay for a while, and think the thing over ? Later, perhaps, we could discuss the scheme in more detail."

Fortunately perhaps for Biggles, before he could answer, the man who had been sent to fetch Angus returned. His manner was slightly agitated and apologetic. He spoke quickly to the Doctor, who threw up his hands before turning to Biggles.

"How very provoking " he exclaimed. " Mackail cannot be found."

Biggles' expression hardened. "What do you mean—cannot be found ? Isn't he on his—

er—farm ? "

"Apparently not. No one has seen him since last night. I can't think what could have happened to him. Surely he wouldn't decide to leave without saying good-bye to me ? "

"What leads you to think that he might have left ? " asked Biggles slowly, his eyes on the Doctor's face.

"His things have gone."

" What things ? "



"I'm thinking particularly of the grain he has just harvested—I mentioned it to you you may remember ? It is no longer in his house. He had borrowed from me a short axe for clearing some ground. That cannot be found, either. Dear, dear ; how very unfortunate that he should choose this moment to go off without leaving word of where he was going. A most lamentable coincidence."

Biggles tapped a cigarette thoughtfully on the back of his hand. "As

you say, a most unfortunate—er—coincidence. Still, he can't have gone far. We may find him."

"I sincerely hope so, for my sake," said the Doctor fervently.

"I hope so, too, for everybody's sake," returned Biggles softly.

"I'll see what can be done," declared the Doctor, with a sudden urgency. "Will you forgive me if I leave you for a moment while I make further inquiries ? I shall not be long. Please make yourselves at home. Clap your hands if you need anything. My man will be at your service."

Biggles nodded. "Go ahead," he said. "Having come so far to see my friend I wouldn't think of leaving without having made contact with him."

"Naturally," agreed the Doctor warmly as he walked to the door.

V

SECTION TWENTY-THREE

AS soon as Liebgarten had left the room Ginger turned questioning eyes to Biggles, glad to have an opportunity of unburdening himself of the problems that now exercised his mind. "Well," he said softly, "what do you make of that ? I must say he seems genuine enough."

"Of course he does," returned Biggles, tapping the ash off his cigarette. "We knew he would. Linton impressed that on me. He had some of it. But I agree with you ; his story, as he puts it, not only has a ring of truth in it, but is in the main literally true, and for that reason it is not easy for me, without being offensive, to demand an explanation of his conduct here, as I intended. In spite of all Linton told me there were moments when I found myself feeling sorry for the man. There is, of course, a different version of the story—the version that people outside could tell ; but you can't call a man a liar when you know that what he is saying is true. Put it this way. If he was one hundred per cent genuine his story might well present the true state of affairs here. Had I not been forewarned I should have been taken in by it. But there's another side to the picture ; naturally, he has tried to keep us from seeing that, but we must always keep it in mind."

"What a pity Angus chose this very moment to make a break."

"That again may or may not be true," said Biggles. "My own view is,

he has been put where we can't get at him. Obviously it wouldn't suit our plausible host to have him spill the beans to us about the place."

"In that case it's a pity we didn't carry right on and find Angus ourselves."

"Unless I'm barking up the wrong tree it was already too late when we got here," opined Biggles. "What I suspect has happened, is this. That negro overseer didn't like the look of us. He rode straight back here and told the Doctor about us—told him that we were looking for Angus Mackail. It may have been a mistake to let the fellow know we were looking for Angus—not that it would have made much difference in the long run.

Liebgarten would have met us anyway, and as we were on his property we could hardly refuse to state our business. As it was, I fancy that as soon as the Doctor learned that we were looking for Angus he sent that negro off with instructions to get him out of our reach, and then came over to delay us while his orders were being carried out. That's probably the real object of this hospitality—that and the fact that the Doctor wants us to keep us where he can see us. We saw that negro ride away, so if my guess is right that tells us the direction of Angus' farm, even though he may no longer be on it."

"But could this black foreman get Angus to leave—I mean, without using force ? "

"Quite easily, I should say. He would only have to concoct a tale about somebody wanting to see him. Why should Angus doubt it ? Make no mistake, though ; the reason why the Doctor doesn't use force is because it hasn't so far been necessary. He'll use it all right when other methods fail. This velvet glove stuff only lasts while it works ; experience has taught me that the softer the glove the harder is the iron fist inside it when the glove comes off, as it usually does, sooner or later. It boils down to this. Angus has been put away somewhere. That means we've lost the first trick, but it's too early to start kicking up a fuss. Our best plan now is to play the Doctor's own game. If he thinks he's got us fooled, so well and good. He'll soon get tired of having us here. Nor do I want to stay, if it comes to that. But just as it suits him to have us where he can see us, so does it suit me to have him where I can see him."

"Then everybody should be happy," observed Ginger without conviction.

"Let us say rather, everyone will pretend to be happy," corrected Biggles. "The thing that worries me most is the safety of the aircraft. Let's try looking at the picture from the Doctor's angle. The question he is asking himself, and it's a question he's got to answer before he can have any peace of mind, is this : how did we suddenly arrive here, out of the blue as it were, without him getting word of our approach ? He has the only boat on the river. He has the natives working for him. Yet here we are, right in the middle of his beautiful paradise. He may send scouts down the river to look for our boat, and if he does they may spot the aircraft. He may not. I tried to put him off doing that by saying that our boat was not waiting—which is as true as makes no difference."

"What's Liebgarten up to now do you suppose ? "

"My guess is that he's having a word with his negro henchman, asking him what he's done with Angus and making further plans to prevent us from getting in touch with him.

He may also remove beyond our reach any other British subjects who might seize the opportunity to tell us how they were tricked by that lying advertisement."

"Then what are we sitting here for ? Isn't it time we got busy ? "

"It is, really, but what would you have us do ? It's no use starting to run in circles round the valley, which, you may have noticed, covers a good many square miles. We should probably find nothing, get sunstroke, and show our hand to the Doctor. I'd like to see a little more of him before we break off what the newspapers call diplomatic relations. I must say those funny teeth and eyes of his give me the willies. I'm never sure whether he'

s looking at me or not. I want him to do some more talking—he may let something drop.

As a result of what I've heard already I have an increasing feeling that there's more going on here than meets the eye. When he was lamenting the lack of machinery, for instance, it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why he didn't get some, 'because, as we know, he's had enough money out of the people here to provide them with all they need. If he was genuine he'd do that. Then I thought again. He must be doing something else with that money, but he's not likely to tell us what it is."

"You haven't overlooked the possibility of his keeping it for his own

use ? "said Ginger with gentle sarcasm.

"No," answered Biggles. "But somehow I don't think he is. How much does he want, for heavens sake ? He must have collected a tidy fortune already. Why stay here and risk losing the lot when he could quite well retire and have the time of his life ? No, there's another anchor holding him, and before I depart, if only to satisfy my curiosity, I'm going to find out what it is. We still hold one trump card. He knows nothing about Linton getting out so he may well think that we are what we pretend to be—casual callers. In that case he has every reason to think he's got us fooled. Quiet now—here he comes. Be careful what you say."

Liebgarten came back into the room mopping his face with a large handkerchief. "You're in the best place," he assured them. "It's most uncomfortably hot outside. I'm sorry to say I've been unable to gather any further news about your friend. I'm afraid he chose an ill-timed moment to go off somewhere. Had he wanted to go home, which I can hardly believe, he could have gone with you. No doubt you could have given him a trip less arduous than the one he will have if he tries to make his way through the forest."

Biggles saw the verbal trap and stepped over it. "Yes, it's a pity," he agreed. "He may not have gone far. As you say, he would hardly be likely to depart without coming to you to tell you his intention, and to say his farewells. He'll probably turn up again presently. In fact, I'm so sure of it that if you have no objection we will this afternoon walk down to his farm and wait for a while." Biggles smiled. "I'm looking forward to seeing his face when he walks in and sees us sitting there."

The Doctor chuckled, showing his metal teeth. "That should give him the surprise of his life. No, my dear sir, I have no objection. Why should you suppose that I might have ? "

Biggles smiled again. "Of course, I didn't seriously suppose that you would object. That was only my natural courtesy expressing itself." His tone had the merest suspicion of banter in it.

"I'd come with you and show you the place myself were it not that I have several things to do—things that should have been done this morning," said the Doctor. "But I'll send one of my foremen with you."

"That's very thoughtful of you, but there's really no need to do that," parried Biggles, who, nevertheless, had not supposed that they would be allowed to wander about the valley at will.

"No, it's better that you should have someone with you," insisted the Doctor. "The valley is extensive and you might easily get lost—or at any rate, waste a lot of time looking for the right farm."

Seeing that the Doctor had no intention of letting them go alone, Biggles submitted. "

Perhaps it's better as you say," he agreed. "But, naturally, I should be sorry if our visit here put you to any inconvenience."

"Please don't mention that word again, my dear sir," protested Liebgarten. "Anything I can do for you will be a pleasure. I am at your service—but there, even now I am forgetting my duties as host. Lunch is served. Let us go in."

Ginger threw a quick glance at Biggles, but he was already following the Doctor out of the room into an adjoining one, furnished as a dining-room, where lunch had been laid for four on a magnificent old carved table, black with age, with a surface that gleamed like polished glass. A big bowl of exotic fruits occupied the centre of it.

"You are expecting another guest I see ? " queried Biggles, noting the fourth place, as they seated themselves in chairs indicated by the Doctor.

"No. It was the place I had laid for Mackail," was the suave reply.

Ginger did not overlook the significance of this apparently casual remark. The Doctor had declared his intention of asking Angus to lunch, knowing perfectly well that he would not be there. Yet he had not omitted to provide a place to prove that the invitation was genuine. It revealed that their host was thorough in his scheming ; that he overlooked no detail, however small. It began to look, thought Ginger with a twinge of anxiety, as if Biggles had met an opponent worthy of his metal.

The meal was the last word in taste and service. The several dishes put on were choice, and the wine would have graced the table of a nobleman. Biggles ate little, drank little and said little. Ginger knew that he was thinking hard—not that he carried this to the point of discourtesy. But it seemed that the Doctor was doing some serious thinking, too, and the conversation was confined to generalities, the weather, politics, the state of Europe and America. As if by tacit consent the war was not mentioned, which strengthened Ginger's belief that Liebgarten was not only a German, as his name implied, but had Nazi sympathies. With the war over for some time, and many

grievances adjusted, an ordinary German citizen need not have been so sensitive about it. With a Nazi it would be different. Defeat might still rankle.

As he finished his coffee Biggles reaffirmed his intention of taking a walk as far as Angus' farm, which they now learned was officially known in the valley as Section 23.

Numbers, averred the Doctor, were more easily remembered than names, and as the farms were laid out in numerical order the locality of any particular one could be found instantly on the general map in the Doctor's room.

Ginger suspected that the real reason for this was because otherwise the farms would be constantly changing their names owing to the deaths of the men who owned them.

However, he did not say so.

The Doctor would have had them wait until, as he put it, the sun had lost most of its heat

; but Biggles argued that the sooner he had done what he had come to do, the sooner would he be at liberty to dispose of his time as he wished. The Doctor did not press his point so they rose from the table and retired to the hall, where Ginger was not surprised to see the black foreman waiting. His manner was now very different from what it had been on the occasion of their first meeting—due, no doubt, thought Ginger, to instructions issued by the Doctor. He stood, sombrero in hand, smiling sheepishly, a trifle nervously, as if this was intended to convey an apology for his earlier behaviour.

"This is Pedro, one of my personal servants," the Doctor told them. "He knows the ground and keeps me informed of all that is happening."

"I'll bet he does," thought Ginger grimly. But here again he did not speak his thoughts aloud.

"He will be your guide to Section 23," went on the Doctor. "I would not advise you to wait too long. The infernal mosquitoes come up as the sun goes down."

Biggles thanked him for the warning. Actually, he had no intention of spending more time at the place than circumstances demanded, being quite sure in his mind that whatever else he found there he would not find Angus.

In this belief, as events were to prove, he was correct.

The walk to Section 23 occupied half an hour, being nearly two miles up-river from the central part of the colony. Pedro walked a little ahead, leaving his charges to follow ; which is not to say that he was careless of what they did ; far from it ; he looked round every few minutes either to make sure they were there or to observe what they were doing.

A number of men and a few women were working on their plots of land, although none was within speaking distance. Sometimes they stopped work to watch the passing of the strangers. Biggles made no attempt to get in touch with them, for one reason because he could not see how it would serve any useful purpose, and for another, he didn't want to upset Pedro. He felt sure that any attempt to leave the path would lead to argument which, at this stage, was better avoided.

There were huts, the so-called farms, at more or less regular intervals. Usually these were small, designed for a single man or a married couple ; but there were others obviously designed to hold several emigrants. On one of the rare occasions that Biggles spoke to Pedro it was to comment on these communal huts. He asked if Mr. Mackail occupied one of them.

Pedro replied in the negative. He said that Senor Mackail had a home of his own, one that he had built himself. He had been allowed to do so as a reward for his hard work.

Ginger was rather puzzled about the expression 'hard work ' ; but when they reached Section 23, as Pedro informed them, he saw at a glance that it was in better condition than most. True, the hut itself was crude. Built of rough timber it could hardly be otherwise. But not only had an attempt been made at a vegetable patch, a piece of ground of some two or three acres had actually been cultivated. A crop of grain had been raised, for the stubble was still there. Recalling what the Doctor had said about the grain and its disappearance he did some quick mental arithmetic. The crop, he thought, had been maize ; but if the yield was anything like in proportion with the area cultivated, then Angus must have harvested several bushels. That he had carried these away with him on his back Ginger was not prepared to believe, so for the first time a serious flaw appeared in the Doctor's statement.

He spoke to Biggles in a low voice. "Poor old Angus," he murmured. "He must have lost some sweat tilling that ground by hand."

"He may have had a definite object in view," answered Biggles meaningly.

" What object ? "

"He must have wanted that corn for a purpose or he wouldn't have raised it. One could think of several purposes, but the most obvious one is, he intended to get a stock of food together for a break-out."

"But he couldn't carry all the corn that he must have harvested here ? "

"He may have swapped some of it to other people for things that would be useful to him.

Or he may have established a number of caches along his route, enough to see him through the forest. There's also a chance that, like Linton, he got hold of a canoe."

"Then you really think he may have bolted ? "

"No, I don't. But I think he intended to. His one thought would be escape, and whatever he did would be to that end. The next few minutes may provide the answer. The absence of the corn means nothing. Liebgarten could

have had it moved to lend colour to his story."

Pedro had walked on to the hut and thrown open the door. After a glance inside he sat down on the doorstep and lit a cigarette with the air of a man who has done his job and has no further interest.

With mounting curiosity Ginger walked with Biggles to the hut and looked inside.

Biggles went on in, lit a cigarette, and then subjected the place to a searching scrutiny.

This did not take long, for there was only one room, which had been made to serve all purposes. A small door led to a lean-to, with a back exit, at the far side. It contained firewood. A straw-filled palliasse, raised a few

inches from the ground by boards across two logs, comprised the bed. There was a simple home-made table, and a similar hair. An old packing-case made a receptacle for odds and ends. On it stood a tin washing-bowl with a towel and razor beside it. A few rags of clothes

hung from nails on the wall. One garment brought a lump into Ginger's throat—a pair of cut-down R.A.F. officer's slacks. These left no doubt as to the ownership of the hut, for on the seat was a patch of oil which Ginger recognised. He had been present when Angus had sat on a chock on which a careless mechanic had left a pool of lubricating oil.

There was really nothing else. A few sun-dried clay bricks, with an opening above to allow smoke to escape, made a fireplace. Over it a battered saucepan rested on two iron bars. A frying-pan hung from a hook. Primitive as the place was, it was clean. A few small photographs, fastened with thorns, decorated the walls. One of these, after a swift glance to make sure that Pedro was not looking, Biggles removed and put in his pocket ; but not before Ginger had caught a glimpse of it. It was a snapshot of a group of officers taken outside No. 666 Squadron Mess during the war. Biggles, Ginger, Algy and Bertie were all in it.

Biggles looked at Ginger and made a grimace. "I hope the Doctor hasn't looked closely at that," he muttered. "If he has, then we're kidding ourselves. He must know who we are.

But somehow I don't think he can have seen it—it wasn't exactly conspicuous. Anyhow, it's better out of the way. There doesn't seem to be anything else. Let's go outside.", Pedro was still sitting on the step. He glanced up as they passed, but did not speak.

Biggles strolled on a little way until he judged they were out of earshot. Then, glancing round the landscape in a disinterested manner, he said softly. "Angus is still here."

Ginger started. "Are you sure ? "

"Certain." Why ? "

"Do you remember a talisman Angus used to carry ? "

"Perfectly well. It was a buckled Spandau bullet. It went through the engine cowling of his machine one day and fell in his lap without hurting him."

"Quite right. After that he wouldn't move without it." Ginger stared. "So what ? "

"It's inside, on a ledge. If Angus decided to go, I don't think he'd leave his razor or his photos. But if he did, there's one thing he would not

leave behind, and that's his bullet."

Ginger nodded slowly. "You're right. He'd take his lucky charm ; he'd need it in that forest."

"Exactly."

"What are we going to do about it ?" demanded Ginger. "That," answered Biggles slowly, "is something that will need very careful thought."

VI

TRAGIC NEWS

FOR some minutes the situation remained unchanged. Biggles, hands in pockets, maintained an attitude of bored indifference, but kept an eye on Pedro who, sombrero tilted on the back of his head, still sat on the doorstep, smoking and rolling fresh cigarettes with deft fingers. He seemed content to wait for someone whom he knew would not come.

At last Biggles spoke in a tone of voice which told Ginger that he had reached a decision.

"This silly game is about played out," he said softly. "The position in a nutshell is, they'

ve got Angus. I'm convinced of that, and I'm not going home without him. We shan't find him by hanging about this hut, though. My chief concern at the moment is Algy and the aircraft. Liebgarten is no fool ; he won't rest until he knows how we got here, and he may hit on the truth.

If he does, he'll hold all the cards. So far, I don't think it has occurred to him that we may be pilots, so be careful not to mention it. Without a machine we should have no better chance of getting out of here than anyone else. Liebgarten may send scouts down the river, or the presence of an aircraft might be reported by natives. In the light of what has happened the place we chose for a rendezvous with Algy is a bit too close to be healthy."

"We can't do anything about it now," observed Ginger moodily.

"We could get into touch with Algy. If you started now you should get to him before he takes off to go back to Bertie."

Ginger stared. "But what about Pedro ? He's not likely to let me go off alone."

"He can't be in two places at once. While we're together his job is easy, but if we split it would put him in a flap. I don't think the possibility of that has occurred to him."

"If I try to move off he'll raise an objection."

"He needn't know. This is the plan. Presently we'll go back to the hut. I'll stop at the step and talk to Pedro. You go in. He'll suppose you've only gone inside. What you'll do is walk right through and out of the back door. Carry straight on to the river ; you should find plenty of cover there. Head downstream and make for the rendezvous. Try to avoid being seen, but don't behave like a fox making for a hen roost, in case you're spotted.

You should be a mile away before Pedro realises that you're no longer here."

"He'll kick up a stink when he does realise it."

"He can stink to his heart's content as far as I'm concerned," returned Biggles.

"What will you tell him ? "

"I shall tell him that you got browned off with waiting and decided to go for a walk instead—to collect wild flowers. You're crazy on botany. You might bring a bunch of flowers back with you to prove it. When I'm sure you've got a good start I shall probably drift back to Liebgarten's house. Come there."

"What do you want me to tell Algy ? "

"Tell him what has happened here and that we shall have to hang on for a bit. There's nothing he can do at the moment so he would be better out of the way. He can come over occasionally, say, once a day, to see if we've turned up ; but tell him not to come too near the valley. If we're ready we'll make a smoke ,fire to bring him down, at a suitable place.

He's not to land unless he gets a signal. The best time would be about dawn or as soon after as possible—that's the arrangement as it stands at present."

"He hasn't enough petrol to keep running to and fro," reminded Ginger. "He'll have to keep enough in hand to get us back to the coast."

"He has enough to do two or three trips, anyway. That should be enough. If we're not away in three days something will have gone seriously wrong. In that case either he or Bertie had better come along to find out what's happened to us"

"Fair enough," agreed Ginger. "But if I'm going to catch Algy before he leaves it's time I made a start. The place is a tidy step from here. When I've seen him I come back to the Doctor's house ? "

"Yes. You should find me there. Behave as if nothing unusual has happened. Play up to the story that you've been botanising. Say you got so interested that you went farther than you intended and didn't notice the time."

"Liebgarten may not believe that."

"It doesn't matter whether he does or not. He won't be able to say much without changing his tactics—and I don't think he'll abandon this hospitality pose of his until he's certain that we've seen through it. When that time comes the gloves will be off, anyway."

"Good enough," said Ginger. "I'll be off as soon as you're ready."

Biggles put the plan into execution by strolling back to the hut. He waited for Ginger to go in, and then finding a seat beside Pedro offered him a cigarette.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he remarked, speaking in English, which he knew the black understood.

Pedro took a cigarette.

"I'm afraid my friend must have decided to give up farming," went on Biggles.

Pedro did not answer at once. He drew a heavy knife from a sheath under his jacket, poised it for a moment by the point, and then with a flick of the wrist sent it with deadly accuracy at a lizard that had emerged from a crack in the ground and lay basking in the sun. The knife cut the reptile clean in halves. Pedro got up, retrieved his knife and returned it to its sheath. This done he resumed the conversation as if nothing had happened.

"Mackail will not come back here," he asserted.

"You can't be sure of that, of course," prompted Biggles, partly to gain time but also in the hope that the black would let something slip. "He seems to have put in a lot of work here, why should he suddenly decide to leave ? "

Pedro was not to be drawn. He considered the shimmering landscape with inscrutable eyes. "Sometimes people go mad," he explained. He tapped his forehead. "The sun hits them."

Biggles continued to make conversation. "If the sun was going to hit my friend it would have happened; long ago," he argued. "He's been here for some time. Very nice too. I wouldn't mind staying here myself."

This statement, which must have been unexpected, brought Pedro's face round with a stare of incredulity. "You like this place ? "

"There's a lot to be said for it," asserted Biggles. "You don't have to wonder what is going to happen next, as do people who live in big cities. There's nothing to go wrong.

After all," went on Biggles warmly, "there must be something attractive about it or you wouldn't stop here yourself, would you ? "

Pedro considered a question which, judging from his

manner, had not previously occurred to him. "Yes, it is better than cities," he agreed at last. "There are no police to boss you about."

Biggles made a mental note that the man had probably been in collision with the police or he would not have made such a statement. It was not unlikely, ruminated Biggles, that the man was actually wanted by the police, and for that reason alone was content to stay where he was. "You don't like the police ? "he suggested.

The negro spat.

After that there was silence for some time. Biggles plied his guide—or escort, as he took him to be—with cigarettes, to keep him in a placid mood. But at last Pedro rose and looked at the sun, now sinking low in the west. "Mackail not come," he declared, in a tone of finality. "We go now. Mosquitoes come soon—very bad."

Biggles was satisfied. He had been allowed to waste more time than he

expected. Ginger should be well down the river by now. Yawning, he got up. "Yes," he agreed, "we might as well go."

Pedro seemed suddenly to miss Ginger for the first time. He looked to all points of the compass and then took a quick step into the hut. He was out in a moment. "Where your friend ? " he asked in a tone very different from the lazy drawl he had up to now employed.

Biggles was lighting a cigarette. "I don't really know," he answered, looking round. "He's never been in this part of the world before and the flowers fascinate him. He said something about going for a walk to collect some."

As Biggles had anticipated, this information threw the black into a quandary. He stared at Biggles, then at the surrounding country, as if seeking inspiration. Biggles perceived his problem clearly enough. The man didn't know whether to go or stay. The idea of reporting to his master that he had lost one of his charges would certainly be repugnant to him and he would avoid it if possible. Nor did the idea of staying any longer at the hut please him. But it had to be one or the other.

Biggles helped him out. "Don't worry," he advised carelessly. "He'll come back presently. Maybe he'll go straight to the Doctor's house. If he comes here and finds we've gone he's bound to make for the house knowing that I shall be there. He wouldn't go anywhere else—not without me."

Pedro breathed a sigh of relief. "Yes, that's right," said he confidently, as if to reassure himself. . "Let us go."

On the return journey to the house he made it clear, however, that he was far from happy.

He stopped often to survey the landscape, obviously looking for the missing guest. This suited Biggles, who was in no hurry to get back. He wanted to give Ginger as much time as possible before his absence was reported to Liebgarten. For this reason, and to support the story he had told, he also made occasional halts, sometimes to admire a flower, light a cigarette, or discuss the farm they happened to be passing. Or he would point to a distant labourer, still working on his section of ground, and say : "Is that him ? "

To this question Pedro always answered no, which did not surprise Biggles, for, of course, he knew as well as his guide that the man indicated was not the one the black hoped to find before he got home.

But by these methods Biggles wasted a certain amount of time ; so much indeed, that by the time the hedge surrounding the Doctor's garden came into view he judged that if Ginger had made an uninterrupted passage he ought to be well on his way back.

With Pedro looking more and more perturbed, as the moment drew near when he would have to report his loss to his master, they strolled on towards the house. But while they were still a little distance away the Doctor himself appeared at the gate, which led Biggles to think that he must have been watching for their return, and observing that one of his guests had disappeared he was unable to restrain his impatience to discover why, so had come to meet them. His first words confirmed this surmise.

Addressing Biggles, he called, "Hello there! What has happened to your young friend ? "

Biggles smiled. "He got tired of waiting so he went off to collect some of your superb wild flowers. I think he must have lost his way—but there, no doubt he'll find it again. I wouldn't worry."

The Doctor treated Pedro to a frown of displeasure which he could not conceal.

However, he soon had himself under control again and was as courteous as ever. "I only hope he doesn't wander away into the forest," he said gravely. "He may not find it so easy to get out, apart from the natives, who are hostile ; and I trust that he will not be so ill-advised as to sit about after the sun goes down, or he might find himself laid low by a bout of fever."

"Oh, I don't think he'll be so silly as to do anything like that," returned Biggles. "He'll be along at any moment. I'll wait here for him, to let him know that I've come back. Don't let me keep you, though, Doctor."

"I may as well stay with you," replied Liebgarten. "I've nothing more to do today."

Biggles did not protest. In fact, he didn't care. The Doctor's presence made little difference to the situation, except that it would prevent any intimate conversation between him and Ginger. He was anxious to hear that Ginger had made contact with Algy—but that could wait until they were alone.

Presently, as they stood talking about the farms Biggles had seen, Ginger appeared, looking hot and dishevelled, carrying a great bunch

of orchids and lilies.

"Look what I've found!" he cried enthusiastically. "Aren't they gorgeous ? "

"They are indeed," answered the Doctor, but without Ginger's enthusiasm. "I hope you won't make a habit of wandering off alone, though."

"Why not ? "asked Ginger ingenuously.

"Because this is not England," said the Doctor smoothly. "Accidents happen here very easily."

" Accidents ? What sort of accidents ? " inquired Ginger.

"We have some exceedingly unpleasant snakes and

reptiles, for one thing," warned the Doctor. "Snakes have a habit of curling up in the paths, and a bite from some species means certain death."

"Well, I don't suppose they are any more deadly than some of the motor cars we have on our roads in England," answered Ginger calmly. "In fact, I'd bet they kill more people than your snakes."

On this point the Doctor was not prepared to argue. "Let us go in and have a cup of tea,"

he suggested. He turned to Pedro. "I shan't need you again," he told him curtly, and was moving towards the gate when the steward who had served drinks earlier in the day appeared. He made a sign to the Doctor that he wanted to speak to him.

"Excuse me for a moment, please," requested the Doctor, and going over to the man was soon engaged in a low, earnest conversation. This ended abruptly. The steward retired to a short distance and stood waiting, while the Doctor rejoined his guests.

"I am afraid I have bad news for you," he said, his eyes on Biggles' face.

"Indeed ? " Biggles' voice was expressionless.

"Yes. My man has just brought the dreadful news. We know now why Mackail was not to be found on his farm. I am afraid—he'll never—

come back."

Biggles stared, startled by the Doctor's tone of voice, which was ominous. "What has happened ? "he asked.

" Mackail is dead."

"Dead ! "

" Yes. For some reason which we may never know he went over to the forest—perhaps to cut wood, as he took the axe with him. There he was bitten by a poisonous reptile or centipede. His body was found half an hour ago by some men who were collecting firewood. A strange coincidence that he should die from precisely such an accident as I described only a minute ago. It is very distressing for me to have to break such tragic news to you, but there was no point in concealing the truth. I am very sorry."

Biggles took out a cigarette and tapped it on the back of his hand. "I'm sure you are," he said quietly. "So am I."

"It looks as if you have made a long and arduous journey here in vain."

"Yes, it looks that way," admitted Biggles.

"I imagine this will curtail your visit here ? "

"On the other hand," said Biggles slowly, "it may prolong it."

The Doctor seemed surprised. " Indeed ? "

"You see," went on Biggles without raising his voice, "I have a vindictive streak in me that I have never been able to control. I may stay on for a bit, until . . ."

" Until ? "

"Until I've destroyed the reptile that killed my friend," said Biggles coldly.

" Ah, quite so. A perfectly natural reaction," agreed the Doctor.

VII

DOWN THE RIVER

WHEN Ginger set off to make contact with Algy he did not expect to have any serious difficulty in reaching his objective. He hoped that he would not be seen, but he thought that even if his movements were observed it was unlikely that anyone would attempt to stop him. After all, as far as he knew there were only two men to consider ; Liebgarten and Pedro ; and the latter was safely occupied. What the Doctor was doing he did not know and he didn't particularly care so long as he was out of the way.

Thanks to Biggles' ruse he got away to a clear start, and had he adhered strictly to his programme everything might well have gone according to plan. That he did not was due to factors which he could not foresee ; and if he allowed these to interfere with his mission it was because he felt that Biggles would agree that he was justified.

Taking advantage of cover provided by growths of prickly pear on ground which no one had yet attempted to cultivate, he was soon out of sight of the hut. Hurrying on, in less than ten minutes he struck the river—not literally, because it would not have been easy to actually get within touching distance, the banks being guarded, as Biggles had presumed they would be, by a belt of dense jungle. As no one was in sight there seemed to be no reason why he should make his progress difficult by plunging into it. Instead, he kept on along the fringe, ready to step back into cover should anyone appear. In this way he made good time, and he did not stop until he was confronted by what at first sight appeared to be an insuperable obstacle. It was the cactus hedge that formed a barricade round the Doctor's house and garden, and now occurred at right angles across his path.

He could not see the house, but above the cacti he could see the tops of the trees that grew within the precincts.

The discovery was, to say the least of it, disconcerting, although, as he told himself angrily, he should have been prepared for it. He looked at the barrier. The spiny cacti started right at the water's edge and ran back for a distance of nearly two hundred yards, where it turned at right angles to run parallel with the river, forming the front hedge in which the garden gate was situated.

To force a way through the uncouth growth might not have been impossible had he been prepared to have his clothes and most of his skin torn off by the ferocious spines that made each bloated leaf look like a hedgehog ; which he was not. Even then a cutlass would have been necessary, and more time than he had at his disposal. The

alternative was to go round, and so outflank the barrier. Considering the matter he saw there was another possibility, and that was the river on his left. He did not want to have to go round by the garden gate, with a chance of running into the Doctor, a meeting that would have been embarrassing.

Nor did he feel like going into the river. Crocodiles, water snakes and carnivorous fish occur in most South American rivers. He was well aware of it and was prepared to treat the river with respect. Still, it had to be one way or the other.

Having considered the matter from all angles he chose the water as the lesser of two evils. At least, he was prepared to explore the possibilities. Nothing would have induced him to enter deep water and swim. He hoped that it would be shallow enough near the bank for wading, so that should danger threaten he would be able to retreat to dry land.

He assumed, not unnaturally, that he would only have to spend a minute or two in the water ; that would be long enough for him to get round the end of the hedge, which he knew was not more than ten or twelve feet thick. He was not to know that the hedge did not end at the water. It did not occur to him that it might turn and follow the river bank, which in fact it did. This he only ascertained after he had entered the water and was in a position to look along the bank. But having started he was reluctant to turn back.

The river at the point where he had entered it was not deep. It varied between a few inches and three feet. This permitted wading, which in any depth of water is necessarily slow, as he was soon to be reminded. He had to feel his way on account of the mud. At every step great bubbles of gas floated up to release such a stench that he was almost overcome. The mud he stirred up went ahead of him in the current, making it impossible to even guess the depth of the water. To help him he presently picked up a stranded length of stout bamboo ; with it he was able to feel his way and so eliminate the risk of stepping into a hole. The cacti, which often hung far over the river, while offering shelter from the sun, also provided homes for innumerable insects which descended on him in showers as if they had been waiting for just that moment to satisfy their voracious appetites. There was no way of dodging them, and striking at them only dislodged more, as he soon discovered.

Precisely what lay behind the hedge on his right he neither knew nor cared. His one concern was to get to the end of it, although this was

not yet in sight. There was no question of leaving the water. The hedge effectually prevented that—which was, he realised, the purpose for which it had been planted. So, taking one thing with another, it was in no sweet temper that he floundered on in a welter of sweat, mud and slimy water.

He had by now estimated, judging from the hedge in front of the house, that he would have to suffer this for about two hundred yards ; and he had got about half way when he came to another obstacle, one which turned out more difficult to surmount than a first cursory examination of it suggested. Indeed, when he first came in sight of it he did not even regard it as an obstacle.

It consisted of a small tributary, a mere brook that ran at right angles across his path. It appeared from the dim recesses of the cactus hedge and entered the main stream in the manner of a drain. At least, it stank like one. Fortunately, as a result of previous false steps, he did not walk straight into it, as he might easily have done, assuming that its depth would be in proportion with its width. He tested it first by probing it with his bamboo. The water was not very deep, but the mud seemed to have no bottom to it.

He drew back and considered the obstacle more closely. It was evident that if he stepped into it he would go in over his head. With a clear run he could have jumped it, but the vegetation prevented even a short run. He noticed something else. The vegetation on both banks of this noisome rivulet was dead, as dead as if it had been struck by lightning, or a blight. The hideous cactus leaves were brown. He struck one with his cane and it snapped off. He struck the branch that carried it and it fell with a crash. Without giving the matter serious thought he was mildly surprised. There seemed to be no reason why the vegetation should behave as if it had been dowsed with weed killer. However, that was not his worry. All he wanted was to find a way over it.

Closer investigation revealed that the ditch narrowed a little higher up, where the cacti gave way to what he knew must be the Doctor's garden. In the ordinary way he would not have attempted to get through the spiny growth, but experiment soon revealed that by striking down the dead stuff with his cane he could make a gap.

He set to work without delay to force a passage to the spot where he thought he should be able to jump across. He struck again and again in a sort of fury, conscious that precious minutes were fleeting. Sweat

poured down his face, and sometimes, when he had to desist in order to remove a thorn from his person, his language was not all that could have been desired.

It took him about ten minutes to reach his objective. After a short pause to mop his face with his handkerchief, he jumped, and breathed a sigh of satisfaction when he landed safely on the far side. He was, of course, now confronted by a repetition of the task he had just performed. In order to get back to the river he would have to bash a way down the bank opposite to the one he had just come up. He could more easily have gone on into the Doctor's garden, but that was no use, as the only way out—apart from the way he had entered—would be through the gate.

He had just raised his cane to strike the first blow of his return journey to the river when somebody near at hand spoke. He stiffened with shock, the cane poised in mid air, so unexpected was the sound. Lowering the cane slowly, he turned, and as he did so the voice spoke again. He recognised it at once. It was the Doctor's. He stared in the direction whence it came, but found his view blocked by a great clump of hibiscus shrubs, the dark shiny leaves of which formed an almost solid wall.

Now, at this stage of the proceedings Ginger was not in the least interested in what the Doctor might be doing there. He only wanted to avoid him and proceed on his journey.

But a fresh difficulty had arisen. If he could hear the Doctor, who presumably had just arrived, then it was quite certain that the Doctor would hear him if he resumed his attack on the dead cactus. And while he stood there wrestling with this new vexatious problem another voice spoke, one which, as far as he knew, he had never heard before.

The language used was German. For the first time he wondered seriously what was going on behind the hibiscus and who was there. And while he wondered it struck him that the conversation might concern him—perhaps hold a clue to the whereabouts of Angus.

Should that be so, then a short delay would be justified. Peering out, he saw that he was fairly close to the long low building in the Doctor's garden, the end of which was visible through a narrow gap between the hibiscus and some tall pampas grass.

Moving with extreme caution he drew nearer to the bushes, almost

gasping with relief as he inhaled clean air. Reaching them he stopped to listen. More than that he was not prepared to risk. To walk to the end of the bushes in order to see round them was to take a chance of being seen himself. Even now his chief hope was that the speakers would depart, leaving him to get back to the river and on with his mission. Sounds indicated that there was no likelihood of this at the moment. Glasses chinked. A chair creaked as someone sat on it. Snatches of distant conversation suggested that still more people were approaching the spot. To these sounds he could only stand listening in a fever of impatience ; but the next words spoken dismissed from his mind all thoughts except what they implied.

Said the unknown voice, apparently in answer to a question that had just been asked : "

He says the treatment must be suspended. On no account must he be liquidated or allowed to die. He may be needed."

Ginger frowned, striving to work out a possible meaning for this sinister remark.

Subconsciously he became aware of a hum, as if someone had started a small dynamo somewhere. What was going on, he wondered. He was tempted to look, but the risk was too great. Then a continuance of the conversation kept him where he was, rigid with attention.

Said the Doctor : "The Oberhaupt understands the position I hope ? "

This use of the word Oberhaupt, coming from the Doctor, puzzled Ginger not a little. If it was to be taken in its literal sense, meaning chief, then it meant that the Doctor was not the head man of the concern. There was someone else, someone over him.

"He understands exactly," said a voice. "They must on no account be allowed to go.

Presently he will be able to speak to them himself. He thinks they may have outside contacts, and he must know for certain before anything is done. He will decide then.

There is no urgency."

The Doctor spoke again. "Then I am to continue as at present ? "

"Yes. It will only be for a day or two. Keep them quiet. Give them anything they want.

The Oberhaupt will see them as soon as he is able to get up. Erich should be back tonight and he may have news."

"I suppose this was bound to happen sooner or later," put in a voice that had not previously spoken.

"Provision was made for it," said another voice curtly. "It is an unfortunate moment for an interruption." "There need be no interruption."

"Very well. That is all that need be said. We need waste no more time."

A glass chinked. Chairs squeaked.

Ginger listened to all this in amazement, not only on account of what the words implied, but because of the number of men involved. What he had overheard seemed to be in the nature of a conference in which at least four men had taken part. And there were at least two more who had not been present—the man referred to as Oberhaupt, and the one named Erich, who was due back that night. It began to look as if Biggles' assertion, that there was more going on here than met the eye, was true to an even greater extent than even he supposed. True, the conversation had been vague, but the broad meaning was unmistakable.

By this time noises beyond the bushes suggested that

the conference was breaking up. Was he, thought Ginger swiftly, justified in risking a peep? It was dangerous, but one glimpse of these men might be invaluable. The success of the expedition perhaps, even their lives, might depend on what could be learned in the next two or three seconds. He decided to take a chance which might never be repeated.

Walking quickly but quietly along the back of the bushes in the direction of the low building, which he now saw was a bungalow of some size, he did not stop until the foliage thinned out sufficiently for him to part it with his hands to see what lay beyond.

What he saw was an open area of short grass bathed in sunshine. In the foreground stood a table, one of the light sort with cane legs commonly used in a garden. On it were glasses, a soda-water syphon, and a number of what looked like beer bottles. Around this central piece of furniture were roughly arranged five deck chairs. Some distance away four white men were retreating in different directions.

One was Liebgarten. He was walking towards his house which could be seen through intervening trees. He swished his cane viciously as he walked as if dissatisfied with the recent conversation. Two men were walking together, in earnest conversation, towards the bungalow. They were clad in white overalls. One had an instrument of some sort hanging round his neck, but he was too far off for Ginger to make out what it was. The fourth man was walking towards some bushes. He, too, wore overalls, a jacket and trousers of pale blue material such as are worn by engine drivers.

Ginger stood still, brows drawn together by the effort of concentrated thought, until the men had disappeared from view. Then, remembering with a start what he was supposed to be doing, he looked at his watch. What it showed gave him another shock. He had tarried nearly half an hour.

Dashing back to the cactus hedge he lashed at the dead stuff in a sort of panic, and heedless of thorns and insects soon forced a passage to the river. In passing he noticed without any real interest that there was more water in the ditch than there had been at the time of his arrival. The water, moreover, was yellow. From it arose a thin miasma of smoke, or steam. He did not stop to determine which, but he thought he knew why the roots of the cactus, which had come in contact with the stuff, had died.

Turning downstream he plunged on, trying to make up for lost time, stirring up mud and making a considerable splash. He also stirred up something else, something which reminded him with a jolt of where he was an, he was doing. A crocodile slid down the bank in front of him and dived into the river. It was only a small one, perhaps six feet long, and it seemed to be as startled as the disturber of its peace ; but Ginger took heed of the warning. Perceiving that where there were small crocodiles there would also be big ones he kept a watchful eye on the water and on the bank.

A small wooden landing-stage, built a little way out over the river, presently made him pause. But there was no one there. There was not a boat, nor even a canoe, so he hastened past, making a mental note that this was probably the mooring for the Doctor's launch when it came up the river with stores and prospective farmers. By landing them in the garden two purposes would be served, thought Ginger. They would see the best part of the valley first, and they would not be able to gain entry to the public part of it without first passing through the Doctor's hands.

It was with no small relief that he reached the end of the cactus hedge and was able to take to dry land. Once ashore he set off at a trot, a gait which he maintained wherever it was possible until he came within sight of the rendezvous. He had long given up hope of reaching it by the time appointed for Algy to leave. In fact, he arrived twenty minutes late. All he could hope for was that Algy would not be in a hurry to go and allow a few minutes grace. Apparently he had done that. He must have waited for about twenty minutes, for when Ginger came in sight of the place he was just taking off. Ginger shouted,

knowing it would be futile. The engines drowned his voice as the roar of a lion would smother the squeak of a mouse. Sick with disappointment and vexation all he could do was sit down, wipe his sweating face, and watch the Navigator skim away over the treetops. The only consolation that he could find was, the machine was still all right.

Algy had not been molested.

Turning back over his tracks he started homewards, hot, tired, and wondering what Biggles would have to say about the failure of his mission. Whether the vague information he had gathered on the way was worth the delay that had cost him success he could not himself decide. The future might determine that, he thought, as he stopped to tidy himself up and clean the worst of the mud from his shoes. Then, remembering his botanical excuse for absence he started collecting flowers that were within easy reach.

He soon had enough for his purpose.

When he came in sight of the house he saw Biggles and the Doctor standing at the gate, evidently waiting for him. Making an effort to pull himself together he joined them in the manner already narrated, and was thus in time to hear the Doctor's tragic news about the finding of Angus' body.

Biggles took a cigarette from his case. "By the way, Doctor," he said, in a flat sort of voice that made Ginger glance at his face. "You won't mind if I see the body of my friend to pay my last respects ? "

The Doctor held out his hands in a gesture of profound regret. "Of course you would wish to do that, but I'm afraid it isn't possible."

Biggles looked at him sharply. "Not possible ? Why not ? "

"Because Mackail has already been buried."

"I see," returned Biggles slowly. "Why the hurry ? "

The Doctor looked pained. "My dear sir, you must be aware that in a climate such as this decomposition is rapid. Death and burial occur on the same day."



"In that case I will go to the grave," said Biggles evenly. "For what

purpose ? "

"To put a wreath on it."

"I will have it sent."

"I'd rather put it on myself," said Biggles obstinately. The Doctor bowed. "As you wish."

"Where is he buried ? "

"Where the body was found I imagine," answered the Doctor. "I will make inquiries."

Perhaps my man will know." He turned to the steward who was still standing a little distance away, apparently waiting for orders.

Biggles took the opportunity to speak to Ginger. "Did you see Algy ?
"he breathed.

Ginger shook his head. "No," he whispered. "I was just in time to see him take off."

" Pity."

"But I have news."

"Hold it till we're alone—he's coming back."

The Doctor rejoined them. "Yes, as I thought, the grave is on the edge of the forest," he said in a low voice. "It's too late to go there tonight, of course. It will be dark in a few minutes and the mosquitos are already active. Let us go in, or we may be the next to be buried." He went towards the house and the others followed.

Biggles glanced at the cactus hedge in passing. "Are you afraid of something getting in ?

" he inquired in a voice which told Ginger that he was in a dangerous mood.

The Doctor smiled. "Oh no," he answered smoothly. "I'm afraid of something getting out."

" Really ? " Biggles' eyebrows went up.

The Doctor pointed to the panther that lay like an evil shadow on the

lawn. "I mean Elizabeth," he explained. "We let her run loose at night. She takes care of the vermin.

Heaven help the rat that comes within reach of her claws."

"An excellent idea," murmured Biggles.

The Doctor walked on.

DISTURBING DEVELOPMENTS

GINGER did not get a chance to speak to Biggles alone for some time—in fact, not until they went upstairs to bath ; there was always somebody in the room, the Doctor or one of his servants. By that time Biggles had accepted the Doctor's invitation to stay the night, for, indeed, there was nowhere else for them to go unless they sought refuge in one of the farm huts, a prospect that did not suit them any more, they supposed, than it would suit the Doctor.

In the meantime there had been some curious conversation in the lounge, where, on their re-entry into the house, tea had been served. At this period the topic had been, naturally, of Angus. The Doctor had commiserated with them, as he was bound to, and he did this with a sympathy which Ginger again found hard to believe was entirely false. That such a tragedy should occur at the very moment of their arrival made it all the more poignant, asserted the Doctor. The venomous pests were one of the drawbacks of the place, he admitted. Accidents were always happening, due to the carelessness of the victims themselves. They would not take precautions. He had implored them to use mosquito curtains to reduce the risk of fever, but it was no use. In the end, sighed the Doctor, most of them paid the penalty of such indiscretion.

To all this Ginger listened with an interest that was by no means feigned. It all sounded so real, so genuine. No wonder people were taken in by the Doctor's glib tongue, he thought. To hear him one would suppose that he was the man to be pitied, not his wretched dupes.

This line of conversation ultimately led to a sequel which Ginger, 'at any rate, certainly did not expect. After holding forth for some time on the practicability of the scheme the Doctor looked straight at Biggles and said : "Of course, what I really need here is a few people like you." He spoke so earnestly that the remark could only be taken seriously.

Biggles stared, obviously taken aback. "Like me ! Why me ? "

"Because I can see you have what it takes in a venture where drive and initiative are essential," announced the Doctor calmly. He then astonished Ginger by going on to suggest that Biggles might like to become an active partner in the scheme. However, the catch was soon disclosed. "Of course," went on the Doctor, "as you would eventually derive substantial benefit it would be only right at this stage for you to make a financial subscription."

" Ah, there you have me," said Biggles sorrowfully. "I'm a poor man. What would I do here, anyway ? I'm nothing for digging."

The Doctor switched to another track, one which gave Ginger a qualm of uneasiness. "

One of the weaknesses of the project is the question of transport," stated the Doctor. "

With quick efficient transport it would be a different proposition."

Biggles did not deny a truth so obvious. "What are you thinking of—a good road, or water transport ? " he asked casually.

"Neither," replied the Doctor. " I was thinking of aircraft. I imagine there is plenty of room here for an airfield. It might be the remedy."

Biggles did not answer at once. Ginger, watching him, felt that they were getting on dangerous ground.

"Yes, I suppose an air link with civilisation would relieve many of your difficulties,"

conceded Biggles. Then he laughed lightly. "You're not by any chance suggesting that I organise a private air line for you ? "

" Why not ? "

"What do I know about aircraft ? " asked Biggles plaintively. "What gave you the idea that I could undertake a job like that ? " -

"Nothing in particular. Someone will have to do it one day. The appointment would carry a useful salary."

Biggles smiled and shook his head. "Then you had better get someone better qualified than I am, or it might cost you a pretty penny."

Ginger looked at the Doctor. Was this talk accidental ? he wondered, or had Liebgarten deliberately led up to it ? That there was a purpose

behind it he did not doubt, but it was not easy to see just what it was. The Doctor's eyes betrayed no secrets.

The Doctor went off on another track, one that was even more difficult to keep up with than the last. He began by saying that he assumed they would stay the night, at least.

Biggles accepted the invitation.

"What puzzles me," said the Doctor, "is how you were hoping to manage until you met me. I mean, what could you have done had I not been here ? "

"Oh, we should have managed somehow," returned Biggles carelessly.

"You would not have been very comfortable, I assure you. You arrive here with absolutely nothing in the way of stores, food, a change of clothes, not even toilet things or a suit of pyjamas. Did you expect to find an hotel ? "

"I expected to find a rest-house, if nothing better," replied Biggles. "I half expected to find a civilised community. Mackail was here. Obviously, there was somewhere to stay or he wouldn't have stayed. I thought he might be able to put us up. As for kit, well, I always travel light. Luggage is a nuisance at any time."

"It can be highly inconvenient to arrive hundreds of miles from anywhere with nothing at all," asserted the Doctor with undeniable logic. "You haven't even any weapons. What would have happened had you been attacked by Indians ? "

"We weren't," Biggles pointed out.

"You might have been. You might still be. You aren't home yet."

Biggles shrugged. "In that case I'm afraid we should have looked rather silly."

"My dear sir, people who die from the results of a poisoned arrow look anything but silly," stated the Doctor grimly.

"Well, it hasn't happened so far," argued Biggles. "I prefer to deal with a situation when it arises."

"The man who gets through is the one who anticipates."

" So I've been told," murmured Biggles, who knew quite well that the

Doctor was merely trying to pump him to find out how they had got there and if they were armed. He closed the conversation by suggesting that a bath would be acceptable, if it could be arranged.

The Doctor said it could, and to Ginger's great relief the party broke up. He had found the conversation rather a strain on the nerves. It had been too much like an interrogation.

The Doctor clapped his hands for the steward and told him to show the guests to their rooms, where, anticipating Biggles' acceptance, night attire had been laid out.

Ginger did not fail to notice that in the matter of rooms the Doctor had spoken in the plural, which told him that they were to be separated. He would have preferred to share the one room, but as this was not to be he could only hope that their rooms were not far apart.

They were, as he presently learned, next to each other, with a bathroom adjacent. He found a suit of silk pyjamas laid out on the bed under half-drawn mosquito curtains. A dressing gown lay beside them. Undressing, he slipped this on and lost no time in visiting Biggles in his room.

"Phew I "he began. "This is getting warm."

"Yes, things are hotting up a bit," answered Biggles, who had started to undress. "What's your news ? "

"First of all, give me your honest opinion about Angus," said Ginger. "Do you really think he's dead ? "

"I don't know. We haven't a scrap of evidence to prove that he is or is not. We've got to find out, and that isn't going to be easy."

"Then you think there's a doubt about it ? "

"All we have at present is Lie bgarten's bare word, and while on this occasion he may be telling the truth, his word is about as reliable as a damp cartridge. Make no mistake, that gentleman is as slippery as a live eel in a bucket of oil."

"But he's willing to let us see the grave."

Biggles shrugged a contemptuous shoulder. "What does a grave prove ? Nothing! When I said I wanted to see it he stalled me off until tomorrow."

"It was nearly dark. That was the reason. There was no lie about that."

"That was the reason he gave, but there might be another."

"Such as ? "

"At the time we were talking there might not have been a grave to see. There will be one by tomorrow morning, though, you can bet your sweet life on that."

"You mean he'll fake one ? "

"What could be easier ? I can see only one ray of hope, and it's this. As I figure it out, had Angus been dead when Liebgarten broke the news he would have insisted on us seeing the body ; he wouldn't have waited for me to ask ; the corpse would have proved his statement beyond any shadow of doubt. When I said I wanted to see the body he had to fake a tale on the spur of the moment."

"His explanation seemed reasonable enough."

"He's an expert at explanations."

"But in the tropics it is customary to bury a body—"

"I know—I know," broke in Biggles impatiently. "But I can't help feeling that if he had a body to show he'd have shown it. He would have kept it above ground long enough for us to see it. A few minutes wouldn't have mattered. He wants us to think that Angus is dead, that's certain. Why ? Because when we're satisfied of that we may depart and leave him and his perishing valley to get on with

whatever is going on here. Surely you're not such a fool as to imagine that he wants us here, are you ? " Biggles' sarcasm was biting.

"Would you go if you were sure Angus was dead ? " " No."

"Why not ? "

In the first place because I'm as certain as I stand here that Angus was alive when we arrived. They may have hidden him somewhere, or, as a more effective way of disposing of him, they may really have killed him. It was one or the other. If he's alive, then I'm staying here till I find him. If he's dead, then I'm staying anyway, staying until the skunk who murdered him is dangling on the end of a rope. Secondly, there are these other poor devils to consider—Britishers, some of them.

Finally, I'm not leaving until I find out what is actually going on here."

"That's okay with me," agreed Ginger. "In view of what you say there doesn't seem to be much point in going to the grave tomorrow morning."

"No point at all—except that we shall know where it's supposed to be. To start digging would be as good as telling the Doctor we think he's a liar. I'm ready to do that when the time comes because I'm sure he is ; but that time isn't yet, because to open hostilities won't make our task any easier. I came here to find Angus, and I'm not going until I've seen him, alive or dead. The grave we shall be shown in the morning is probably being dug at this very moment. Who will dig it ? Not a white man. More likely one of the Doctor's negro servants, who must be in his confidence ; and if I know anything about black labour no more work will be done than is absolutely necessary. No. Coincidence can be a queer thing, but to ask me to believe that Angus died on the very day of our arrival is stretching it too far. I'll have to think about our next move. Meanwhile, what about this news of yours ? Does it throw any light on what we've been talking about ? "

"It might, although I can't see how," answered Ginger, who then went on to tell the story of his trip down the

river and explain why he had missed Algy. He repeated word for word the conversation he had overheard, as near as he could remember it.

Biggles heard him out. Then he said : "You realise what the first result of this will be ? "

" No—what ? "

"When we don't turn up at the rendezvous in the morning, the next thing we shall have will be Bertie or Algy on the prowl, looking for us."

"That should fairly rock the Doctor on his heels," declared Ginger. "He'll think his hideout is becoming a riverside lido."

"We may get rocked, too, if he realises we're in a party." "What's to prevent us from getting up early and meeting the aircraft ? "

"That might be a good move," admitted Biggles. " think it over and let you know at bedtime. We must contact Algy if only to prevent him from getting upset if we're here for a long time, as we may be. We might even pretend to take Liebgarten's word for it that Angus is dead,

and push off, and then slip back to do a spot of serious scouting. If he thinks we've gone he might do something to give us a clue to his real business. I'll think about that, though. It's time one of us got in the bath or they may wonder what we're doing."

"One last thing," said Ginger tersely. "The conversation I heard. Does it suggest anything to you ? "

"Not a lot. It might mean anything. It might be dangerous to try guessing at this stage.

Apparently the Doctor's handling of us has been approved by the Big Boss—whoever he may be. He's been told to carry on. The engine you heard was probably the electric light plant. They must have one, because the house is lighted by electricity. We'll talk about that conversation again later on. It may hook up with something. If the Big Boss is anxious to see us—well, that suits me fine. Who's this fellow Erich I wonder ? Erich . . .

he'll be a German. It's a common German christian name. I wonder . . . no, it couldn't be .

. . not here." Biggles thought for a moment. "I think the most important part of the information you picked up was not so much what you heard as the number of people at the conference. What are they all doing ? There must be at least half a dozen of them in it.

Something pretty big must be going on. If we could get a description of these people to the Yard, Raymond might identify some of them and so give us a line on the racket. But we'll talk about this later. Go and get in your bath. I'll join you ready to go down in about a quarter of an hour."

Ginger had a quick bath and returned to his room. Deep in thought he started dressing.

He had left his door ajar so that he could hear Biggles in the bath and so judge when he would be ready to go down. He finished dressing, and while he was waiting he had a sudden feeling that he had forgotten something—had lost something. Something was different. His clothes did not feel quite the same. He ran his hands over them. As his right hand crossed his hip pocket he stopped suddenly. He knew what it was. His automatic was no longer there. For a moment he stood still, trying to work out the full purport of his loss. Then he hurried to Biggles' room. He went straight to his trousers, which had been thrown over the back of a chair. His hand went to the hip

pocket. It was empty.

At that moment Biggles came in. One glance at Ginger's face and he said curtly. "What's wrong ? "

"They've got our guns," Ginger told him.

Biggles' lips came together in a hard line. "It looks as if the Doctor's won the second trick," he said slowly. "I suppose we should have taken our clothes to the bathroom, but somehow I didn't think the Doctor would try anything like that—yet. It's as good as a declaration of war. Okay, if that's how he wants it. So that's why he gave us dressing gowns. Say nothing about this. I'll be with you in a jiffy."

Five minutes later they went down the stairs together to rejoin the Doctor in the lounge.

They knew he was

there because they could hear his voice, which, at the same time, told them that he was not alone.

"It sounds as if Erich has arrived," murmured Biggles as he opened the door.

They went in.

The Doctor saw them at once and rose to meet them. His face was all smiles. " Ah I There you are," he greeted, with more than usual cheerfulness. "You'll be delighted to know that an old friend of yours has just arrived—at least, he tells me that he once knew you very well. He's been telling me some of your adventures. He's so looking forward to meeting you again."

With that the second man, who had been sitting with his back towards them, rose and turned ; a tall, well-dressed man, rather thin, good-looking in an austere way, with a monocle in his eye. In his right hand he held a cigarette in a long holder. His left hand was occupied with a walking stick on which he leaned heavily.

"Hello, Bigglesworth," he said, smiling curiously. "So we meet again, eh ? What a small place the world is, to be sure."

Ginger's heart gave a lurch. It seemed to go cold. The Doctor had not lied. He knew the man, knew him well—too well. So this was Erich, he thought bitterly ; Hauptmann Erich von Stalhein, a soldier of the

old Prussian military caste, one time high:spot of German Military Intelligence after a serious leg wound had put him off the Active List ; in more recent times one of the shrewdest "back-room boys" of the Gestapo. They had met before, often enough for Ginger to know that under the greying hair, behind the cold blue eyes and aristocratic features, were some of the most astute brains in Germany. Ginger's stomach went down like a lift. If von Stalhein had been talking to the Doctor then the game was up.

Biggles had walked on as if nothing unusual had happened. "Yes," he agreed, "the world is a small place, and it's getting smaller, apparently. Who would have thought of meeting you here ? "

"Who would have thought of meeting you ? " parried on Stalhein lightly.

" I've often wondered what happened to you," said Biggles, as if he really meant it.

"I didn't have to wonder about you," returned von Stalhein. "Your name was constantly brought to my notice. I have watched your career with professional interest—and, if the truth must be told, with admiration. You are the living proof of the classic belief that those who live dangerously, live longest."

"I hope to maintain that tradition," answered Biggles, smiling faintly.

Everything must come to an end, you know," murmured von Stalhein sadly.

"True enough," admitted Biggles. "But I would almost feel sorry if anything happened to you. For a long time you were the one bright star in a gloomy sky. I was sorry to learn, though, that you had got tangled up with Hitler."

Von Stalhein waved his cigarette holder. " Pah ! That fellow Germany meant more to me than Hitler. It still does, for that matter."

Biggles looked his old antagonist straight in the eyes. "Then why don't you get back where you belong and try to sort out the mess you helped to make ? "

"The answer is simple," returned von Stalhein quietly. "I have no desire to end my life at the end of a rope, as did the other poor fools who hadn't the wit to make provision against such a melancholy fate."

Biggles nodded. "So that's why you came here ? " "One of the. reasons."

The Doctor stepped into the conversation. "Why are we all standing ? " he lamented. "

Please sit down, gentlemen. We have so much to talk about."

As Ginger sank into a chair he felt that this was another of the rare occasions wherein the Doctor could afford to tell the truth.

IX

BIGGLES TURNS THE TABLE

THE scene, as it was set, was like a play, thought Ginger, as he looked around ; and although he was one of the players he could not remotely guess what the climax was to be. That such an act could not end without a dramatic climax was certain, and he was afraid, very much afraid, that it would be one in which the villains of the piece would be left holding the stage. Everything was in their favour, and Biggles could not be blamed for that. Clairvoyancy, a faculty to which Biggles laid no claim, would have been necessary to visualise the arrival of the very man from which they had most to fear.

Apart from the present situation, von Stalhein had old scores to wipe out. It was, pondered Ginger gloomily, one of those fantastic things which that soulless magician, Chance, delights to pull out of the hat to confound those who do not treat her with respect.

The Doctor resumed his seat, as did von Stalhein. Each kept a hand in a side pocket, Ginger noticed. Biggles seemed more particular about where he sat, for having apparently given the matter some thought he moved a chair to within the radius of light cast by a tall, wrought-iron, standard electric lamp, which provided the only light in the room. As is customary, it had been placed near the table so that the full benefit of the light it gave fell on that piece of furniture, with its silver cigarette-box, ash-trays, glasses and an elegant decanter. At last, as if satisfied, Biggles sat down opposite von Stalhein, which left Ginger facing the Doctor, with the table in the middle.

Thus the stage was set, and to a spectator it must have appeared an attractive one, with the warm steady glow of the lamp falling like a spotlight, on the men themselves, in comfortable repose, with cigarette smoke curling over them, on glass and silver, with costly furniture mere shadows in the dim background. With nerves taut but steady Ginger waited for the play to begin.

The Doctor spoke the opening lines. Looking at Biggles he said severely : "I think you have been guilty of the gravest discourtesy."

" Really ? I'm sorry to hear that," answered Biggles. "In what way ? "

"You misrepresented yourself to me from the beginning."

"I think, if you will cast your mind back, that we haven't represented ourselves as anything," corrected Biggles. " If you assumed that we were something different from what we are that was not our fault. What did you expect me to do—tell you my life history ? You're a nice one to talk about misrepresentation, anyway. I had a purpose in coming here. I made no secret of it. I came to find an old friend and war comrade named Angus Mackail. That, in case you should forget it again, is still my intention."

Von Stalhein sent a smoke ring curling through the light. "Purely as a matter of detail, how did you know he was here ? "

"Was there any reason why I shouldn't know—why it should be kept a secret ? "

"You were a long time coming."

"I came as soon as I knew he was here and the conditions in which he was living."

"There was nothing to prevent him from leaving, if he didn't like it here."

"Oh yes there was. You know it and I know it, so let us not waste words arguing about that."

"I gather somebody told you Mackail was here ? " prompted von Stalhein.

" Quite right."

"May I ask who it was ? "

"You may. It was a man named Linton."

Von Stalhein glanced at the Doctor. "What did I tell you ? " There was a touch of asperity in his tone as he went on, still speaking to the Doctor. "I warned you he was the type who might do it. You took his departure too casually."

"I took the usual precautions," expostulated the Doctor.

"What does it matter ? " cut in Biggles. "Suppose we stick to facts ? Your precautions failed. He got out. He came to me. I came here."

"Naturally," murmured von Stalhein.

"The remarks you have just made make it clear that you would have stopped him had you been able to."

"We never attempt to stop anyone who wants to go," asserted the Doctor.

"Because you have taken every step possible to ensure that any attempts to escape from here—that's the word, escape—must fail," said Biggles frostily. "You can't fool me. I know. Linton told me all about this place—and you. He couldn't tell me about Mackail without telling me the rest of the tale. Now you know who we are, Doctor Liebgarten, because von Stalhein has told you. That breaks even. The cards are on the table. What are you going to do about it ? "

"What are you going to do ? " parried the Doctor, into whose soft voice a harder note was creeping.

"I'm going to do what I came to do," replied Biggles. "I'm going to find Mackail and take him home. I am also going to take home any other British subjects who are tired of playing slave to a plausible chiseller."

"Anything else ? " sneered Liebgarten.

"Yes," answered Biggles evenly. "When they go they'll take with them the money they put into this bare-faced swindle."

"I don't think swindle is a nice word to use between gentlemen," complained von Stalhein in a hurt voice.

"I choose my words for the company I keep," came back Biggles curtly. "You're liable to hear still harder words before I go."

"Now—now. Just a minute," protested von Stalhein,

"In Germany we have a saying, hard words make wounds." " And in England we have a saying, soft words butter no parsnips."

Von Stalhein smiled as he fitted another cigarette into his holder. "Let us agree that both maxims are apt, and let it go at that," he suggested.

"By the way, where is Lacey ? I imagine he isn't far away ? "

"He will be where I told him to be," replied Biggles. "Would you like him to join the party ? "

"If I know him he'll come without being invited, sooner or later," replied von Stalhein with a ghost of a smile. "I suppose at the moment he's looking after your aircraft ? You know, it's an extraordinary thing, but the Doctor here tells me that an aircraft never occurred to him as a solution of the mystery of how you got here. He's been in the wilds for so long that he can't catch up with things."

"He will," returned Biggles curtly. "But suppose we confine ourselves to the purpose for which I came here. We shall get on faster that way."

"What's the hurry ? "

"I'm always in a hurry to leave a place that stinks." The Doctor broke in. "Very well."

What do you want ? " "You know perfectly well what I want," answered Biggles. "For a start I want Mackail."

"I told you Mackail was dead."

"I know you did, and I didn't believe you."

"Are you suggesting that I'm a liar ? " The Doctor's voice rose a tone.

"You flatter yourself, Doctor," said Biggles succinctly. "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm talking plain English, I hope."

"Suppose it happens to be true ? "

"Then I can only say, Doctor Liebgarten, that it will be a bigger calamity for you than for me."

" How ? "

"Because, if it is true, before I leave here I shall pull your valley up by the roots and tell the world just what sort of a racket you've been running here."

"Surely you're not so ingenuous as to suppose that we shall allow you to do that ? "

"Who's going to prevent me ? "

"I am."

"Am I to take that to mean that you will use force to prevent me from leaving here when I'm ready to go ? " "If necessary."

"That's a threat."

"You can call it what you like. You're fond of talking in facts. You'd better think that one over."

"I see," said Biggles slowly. "In that case I hold myself justified to take any steps that I consider necessary to evade what, in legal terms, is called kidnapping."

"You can take any steps you like, but they won't lead you out of this valley," rapped out the Doctor, whose pose of unruffled calm had broken down.

Biggles turned to von Stalhein. "You heard that ? Do you agree to it ? "

Von Stalhein shrugged. "In view of the line you have taken I have no alternative. I live here, remember, as well as Liebgarten. I should deplore a public scandal as much as he would."

"Very well," returned Biggles. "That leaves nothing more to be said. I have already talked so much that my throat's dry. May I have a drink ? "

The Doctor waved a hand towards the decanter with an airy gesture. "Help yourself. I only hope that my excellent sherry will not be wasted."

"I'll leave you to be the judge of that," retorted Biggles, reaching for the decanter.

What happened after that for the next forty seconds of time occurred so unexpectedly and at such speed that Ginger's brain was always a little behind the events. In any case, he had only sounds to guide him, for simultaneously with the last words from Biggles'

lips the room was plunged into darkness. This was the actual sequence. First, unexpectedly, for Biggles was nowhere near the lamp, the light went out. This was followed by a crash of splintering glass, a splash, and a half-stifled gasp. There was swift



movement and a scuffle in which some glasses were knocked over. A petrol lighter snapped on, only to be extinguished as it hurtled across the room. This was succeeded by five seconds of silence, a period which Ginger found the most hair raising of all. He crouched lower against the chair behind which he had flung himself in momentary expectation of pistol shots. None came. Instead, the light came on again, revealing von Stalhein, pistol in his hand half raised, looking wildly about him. Across the silence cut Biggles' voice, as brittle as

ice. "Drop that gun, von Stalhein." The German's head jerked round to the direction of the sound, as did Ginger's ; and there was Biggles, on one knee against the wall, automatic in his right hand covering von Stalhein, while with his left hand he still held the plug, carrying the electric light flex, to its socket. "Drop it, I said,"

snapped Biggles' voice again.

Von Stalhein raised a shoulder in a gesture of resignation. The pistol dropped to the floor with a thud.

"Thank you," acknowledged Biggles. "Pick it up, Ginger. You can give von Stalhein his lighter back, too. It nearly spoilt my effort."

Ginger went round the table and picked up the weapon. In doing so he nearly fell over Liebgarten who was prone on the carpet surrounded by the shattered remains of the decanter and its contents.

Biggles abandoned his position and came back to the table. "Sit down, von Stalhein," he invited. "We can now talk on more equal terms. I hate this vulgar brawling and I'm sorry to have made such a mess, but you forced me to it. It's time you knew that threats always did have this sort of effect on me."

Von Stalhein looked ruefully at the flex that connected the standard lamp with the wall. "

My fault. I didn't notice it—and I understand now why you were so particular about where you sat. It puzzled me at the time. I never did like standard lamps. I shall avoid them in future."

By this time of course Ginger fully comprehended what had happened. Biggles had flung the decanter into the Doctor's face a split second after disconnecting the electric flex with a jerk of his foot, which meant that he had foreseen the possibilities even before he had sat down. As soon as he had thrown the decanter he must have jumped over the table and taken the gun from Liebgarten's pocket, during which time von Stalhein had drawn his own pistol but dare not use it in the dark for fear of hitting the wrong man. Biggles had then crossed the room and reconnected the light.

Still half-dazed with the speed of it all Ginger picked up and gave von Stalhein his petrol lighter, put his chair on its legs—for it had been knocked over—and sank into it.

"Keep an eye on the Doctor," Biggles told him. "I don't think he's badly

hurt."

"Okay." Feeling more comfortable now that he had a pistol in his hand, Ginger obeyed.

"You know, Bigglesworth, you're wasting your time playing public benefactor, always a thankless task," averred von Stalhein in a tone half-serious, half-bantering. "You'd make a fortune on the films. The performance you've just put on was as slick as anything I've seen on the screen."

"I'm glad you liked it," answered Biggles evenly. "But save your bouquets for someone more appreciative. I came here to get something—a man named Mackail. Where is he ? "

"I don't know."

"Why not ? "

"I didn't ask."

"Is he alive ? "

"I don't know."

"All right. Have it that way if you like. I was only trying to save time," said Biggles quietly. He got up, rolled the Doctor under the table with his foot, then clapped his hands. "I hope you've got more sense than to try anything silly," he went on, putting the pistol into his pocket, but keeping a hand in it. "Ginger, put that gun of yours out of sight, but keep it handy."

The summons was answered by the steward who looked at the party with askance. Or perhaps he wondered what had become of the Doctor.

"Tell Pedro that we should like to see him," ordered Biggles.

The man withdrew.

At the same time the Doctor showed signs of returning consciousness. He groaned.

Presently he sat up, and Biggles watched without emotion as he mopped his face with a napkin that had been on the table. There was a big red bruise on his forehead, but no actual wound. "What

happened ? " he asked in a bewildered voice. "Was it an earthquake ? "

"Something of the sort," replied Biggles.

Still looking dazed, somewhat unsteadily the Doctor rose to his feet and felt his way to a chair into which he dropped heavily. "What happened ? "he asked again.

"Your sherry wasn't wasted," Biggles told him. "You had rather too much of it, that's all.

Sit still and don't ask questions."

The Doctor looked at von Stalhein. It was evident that he still did not understand what had happened. But when Biggles showed him his pistol a look of enlightenment dawned in his eyes.

Footsteps approached from outside.

"Keep your eyes on these two," Biggles told Ginger, as he turned to face the door.

Pedro came in and halted just inside the threshold. Biggles spoke. "Pedro, I believe you dug a grave this evening. Is that so ? "

Pedro blinked, looking worried. After a brief pause he answered, "Yes."

"What did you put in it ? "

Again the black hesitated. His eyes went to his master questioningly, for guidance.

"It's all right, speak up," commanded Biggles briskly.

"The Doctor is as anxious to know as I am. There seems to be some doubt about it."

"But the Boss didn't tell me to put anything in," answered the negro, puckering his forehead in an effort to understand what was going on.

"That's what I thought," asserted Biggles. "I told the Doctor so, but he would argue. By the way, where is Mr. Mackail now ? "

"But—but— . . . he's where the Doctor told me to put him," blurted

Pedro, still looking bewildered.

"I see. Thank you, Pedro. Just wait outside a minute, will you ? "

After a final stare Pedro left the room.

Biggles turned to Liebgarten. ""Where is he ? ""

"I've already told you, he's dead," insisted the Doctor, in a sulky voice.

"Then heaven help you," said Biggles simply. "Because," he went on trenchantly, "if he isn't in this room in five minutes I'm going to set this house on fire—and I'm not fooling."

Biggles stepped to the nearest curtain and flicked on his lighter. "I hope you'll enjoy living in one of your lousy huts."

"I wouldn't do that, Bigglesworth," put in von Stalhein anxiously. "It would be most inconvenient for everyone."

"All right, I'll give you one more chance," offered Biggles. Aloud, he called : " Pedro I "

Pedro came back into the room.

"The Doctor would like you to fetch Mr. Mackail," said Biggles.

Pedro looked at the Doctor for confirmation.

"You'd better have him in," von Stalhein told the Doctor in a low voice. "I know Bigglesworth. He doesn't make threats unless he intends to carry them out. You are going to lose this house otherwise, and I don't think one man is worth that."

"Bring Mackail," ordered the Doctor, speaking to Pedro. The words seemed to choke him.

"And by the way, Pedro," put in Biggles. "This is a very private matter. Don't mention it to the others." Pedro retired.

"Now we're getting somewhere," announced Biggles. "It's a good thing for your noble mansion, Doctor, that von Stalhein knows me as well as he does. It would have been a pity to burn up a nice place like this, although I may have to do it yet." Biggles returned the lighter to his pocket.

"I still don't see how you hope to get away with this, Bigglesworth," said von Stalhein who, throughout the proceedings, had maintained his composure.

"You'll see when the time comes," promised Biggles. "The odds against you are too heavy. You still have a long way to go."

"Well, I've made a start, anyway," replied Biggles. "They say that a good beginning is half way."

"There's still the other half," reminded von Stalhein drily.

"The first half is always the hardest," answered Biggles smiling.

At this point Pedro came back into the room bringing with him a veritable scarecrow of a man. Ginger moistened his lips, staring. Thin and ill though the man looked he recognised Angus, but the state he was in appalled him.

"Biggles ! " Angus staggered forward, arms outstretched, his face twisted in a grin, but with almost a sob in his voice, which in itself was sufficient to betray the weak condition he was in.

"Hello, Angus—take it easy," said Biggles, with one eye, as the saying is, on the Doctor and von Stalhein. Raising his voice he went on, "All right, Pedro, that's all for now."

As soon as Pedro had gone his eyes came to rest on the Doctor's face with such an expression of contempt in them that Ginger held his breath, expecting an outburst. But Biggles had himself in hand. "You rat," he grated. "You vile Nazi thug. You and the Beast of Belsen would have made a good pair. One more bleat from you will be the only excuse I need to do to you what someone should have done long ago."

"Biggles, how did you know ? 1" cried Angus. "How did you get here ?
"

Biggles turned to Angus. "Listen, old boy, we shall have more time to talk about that presently. Are you well enough to travel ? "

"Yes—if it isn't too far."

Biggles looked again at the Doctor and von Stalhein. "Don't move, either of you—and believe me when I say I'm in no mood to argue." Then, turning to Ginger he went on. "

Get back to Algy. Take Angus with you. You can go out through the front door."

"What about you ? " asked Ginger.

"I'll join you later."

"In how long ? "

"I shall be on time. Get cracking."

Ginger got up. "Come on, Angus," he said. On his way to the door he stopped and looked back over his shoulder as if a thought had struck him. "What about Elizabeth ? "

"That may have been a bluff. If she turns nasty you'll have to shoot her. That goes for anyone else who tries to stop you. You've got to get out and there's no other way."

"Good enough. See you later." Followed by Angus, Ginger strode to the door.

As the door closed behind them Biggles faced the Doctor and von Stalhein. "Make yourselves comfortable," he invited frostily. "We shall be here for some time. As the Doctor remarked earlier in the evening, we've lots to talk about."

X

THE RIVER OF DOUBT

MEANWHILE, on reaching the hall and finding no one there, Ginger went on to the front door and looked out. Not a soul was in sight. All lay quiet and serene, drenched in tropical blue moonlight almost artificial in its brilliance and beauty. The branches of trees and the fronds of palms hung silently at rest above sprawling inky shadows that might have been dragons sleeping on the lawn. Here and there, against the sombre background of flowering shrubs, the blossoms, white in the moonlight, hung suspended in mid-air like tired ghosts.

With the enchanting nature of the picture Ginger was not concerned. He was in no mood to appreciate art in any shape or form. From the top of the steps that gave access to the drive, gun in hand his eyes made a swift reconnaissance, paying particular attention to the area that lay between him and his first objective, the gate.

"Which way are we going ? " asked Angus.

"Through the gate and down the river."

"Then what are we waiting for ? "

"I'm looking for the offspring of Satan that Liebgarten uses for a house dog."

"You mean Elizabeth ? "

"Yes. You've seen her ? "

"Aye, several times. She must be half tame the way she lets Liebgarten fondle her."

"We shan't need to go as far as stroking her," said Ginger. " If she'll just stay quiet, that'll be enough for me. Come on."

As they walked briskly up the drive it looked as if his hopes were to be fulfilled. Nothing moved. And they had almost reached the cactus hedge when from somewhere in the shadows ahead there came a sound which brought them to a halt. It was a low snarl.

Ginger stared, but could see nothing. So intense was the darkness under the trees that the hedge appeared to be a solid wall. "Can you see her ? " he asked. "I can't see a blessed thing."

" Nor I."

" I suppose it is Elizabeth ? "

"I don't think the Doctor has any other pets."

Ginger took a slow pace forward., The movement was greeted by another snarl. He stopped, eyes probing the shadows ahead without success. "What do we do in a case like this ? " he muttered impatiently. " Biggles said shoot her, but you can't shoot what you can't see. I wonder can we call her out." Feeling foolish he made a clucking sound, at the same time patting his knee as if he were calling a dog.

His reward was another snarl, this time with a definite menace in it. "Confound the brute,

" he said angrily. "We're wasting time."

"Suppose we push on and risk it ? " suggested Angus. "I shan't breathe, freely till I'm out of this place."

"You're liable to stop breathing altogether if you get tangled up in a wrestling bout with that black devil," answered Ginger, who was beginning to get alarmed by this hold-up. "

If she comes she'll be on top of us before we see her, and we shall have had it."

"Well, standing here won't get us anywhere," declared Angus, with a

truth that was undeniable.

"Just a minute—I've got an idea," said Ginger quietly. "I know of another way out, down by the river. I don't like it very much, but I'd sooner try it than risk stepping on the tail of this—"

Another snarl, this time a really vicious one, decided him. He broke off short and started to back away, pistol at the ready. "Let's get out of this," he said crisply.

They had backed some ten or a dozen paces when the cause of their discomfiture appeared, a black, slinking shadow which, weaving a sinuous course from one side of the drive to the other, was never still.

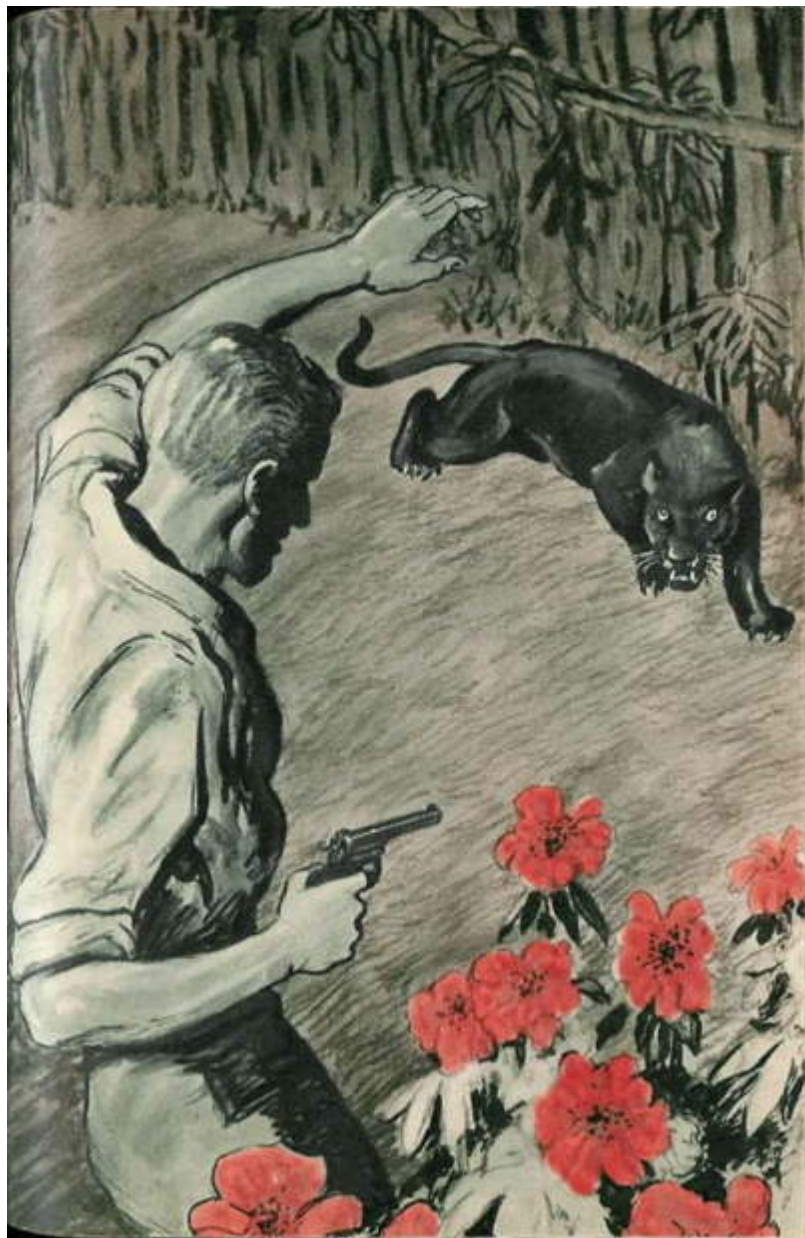
"There she is I " said Angus aggressively. "Let her have it."

"I would if I was sure I could hit her," returned Ginger. "But a small mark, and a moving one at that, in this tricky light is no sort of a target. It's a thousand to one I should only wound her if I did hit her. Keep going. I'm all for the river."

They set off, now at a brisk walk, looking back over their shoulders at the panther, which followed at a distance, still weaving from side to side, snarling and lashing its tail. More than once, as it ran in close as if intending to charge, Ginger raised his pistol and tried without success to take aim. Each time the brute seemed to realise what he was doing, and dropped in the grass, so that only its eyes and ears could be seen.

In these uncomfortable circumstances, having made a detour of the house, they reached the hedge at the far side of the garden, behind which ran the river. There was no difficulty in finding the ditch because Ginger knew where it was. Having reached the gap he had made earlier in the day he told Angus to go ahead while he watched the panther which, apparently satisfied that it had succeeded in its purpose, faded away. Still, Ginger found that not being able to see the beast was even more disturbing than having it in view.

"Turn right when you get to the river," he told Angus. "On no account step into that ditch



; it's deep, it stinks, and I suspect it's poisonous."

A couple of minutes, punctuated by some hard words about thorns, and Angus announced that he was in the river, whereupon Ginger joined him and took the lead.

"We haven't far to go," he said confidently, making a frantic effort to wipe away with his sleeve the swarms of mosquitoes that were settling

on his face.

All went well until they came within sight of the landing-stage, and then Ginger pulled up short, peering ahead. "Spare my days I " he growled. "What's that ? " He pointed to a big dark shape that loomed against the shadows.

"Looks like the Doctor's launch," answered Angus. "That's the tub that brought me here."

"Of course—what a fool I am," murmured Ginger. "Knowing that von Stalhein had arrived I should have been prepared for it. What sort of a crew does she carry ? "

"Usually, three—a white and two blacks."

"Do they keep a watch ? "

"They might, but I shouldn't think so, not here." "What about taking her ? "

"No use," returned Angus. "She won't have steam up. She runs on wood fuel. There are dumps up and down the river. It would take us at least half an hour, without any opposition, to raise a head of steam."

"What about cutting her adrift, or setting her on fire ? "

suggested Ginger, who was feeling vindictive. why ? "

"Just to make things awkward for them."

"You'd make things a sight more awkward for the other people here. This is the boat that brings up the grub, don't forget. The Doctor and his friends wouldn't starve, but the others might."

" Ah-huh. I see what you mean," concurred Ginger.

"She tows a dinghy aft. We might take that."

"By thunder! That's good news," declared Ginger. "Rowing will be easier than blundering along that bank in the dark. Come on."

A man was sleeping on deck. They couldn't see him but they could hear him snoring. He might, or might not, have been a sentry. Ginger didn't care as long as he stayed asleep.

Going to the stern of the launch he waded out until he could reach the painter that secured the dinghy to its parent vessel, and drew the smaller craft towards him. Taking infinite pains to make no noise they got into it. Ginger cut the painter near the launch to retain as much of it as possible, and pushed off. A moment later they were afloat on the broad surface of the Polito—a river of ink, it appeared to be in the moonlight—drifting slowly downstream with the current.

"That's better," breathed Ginger, scraping mosquitoes from his face with a shuddering gasp. "My gosh! I've seen some mosquitoes in my time, but these little devils tear lumps out of you. Paradise, eh ? Paradise my foot I "

"You get used to them in time," said Angus casually.

"I hope I shan't be here long enough," returned Ginger. "Look what they've done to you.

You must be as full of fever as that skunk Liebgarten is full of guile."

"When he misses the dinghy he'll know we've taken it and must be on the river somewhere," Angus pointed out

"By the time he discovers that I hope we shall be in the atmosphere," answered Ginger. "

Which reminds me. I wonder how Biggles is getting on. He'll have to walk down that dirty forest path that follows the bank in order to join us. He didn't say how long he was going to be—but that, I imagine, was because he didn't want the Doctor to know too much about our movements." As he spoke, now that they were some distance from the launch, Ginger picked up the oars, slipped them into the rowlocks, and brought the dinghy under control. Then for a little while he rowed on in silence, quietly, and knowing they were in no hurry, without any great expenditure of energy.

Said Angus presently : "How did you learn I was here ? " "A fellow named Linton got in touch with Biggles and told him all about it."

" Mon 1 That's grand," said Angus warmly. "He was a good scout. I should have gone with him but I went down with fever."

"Yes. So he said. He told Biggles the whole story before he—died."

" Died ? "

"He died in the London Hospital for Tropical Diseases. He was rotten with fever and had a poisoned arrow in his leg into the bargain. Biggles reckoned it was just guts that kept him alive until he could spill the beans about this ropery outfit."

"Poor old Linton," murmured Angus, in a voice heavy with sorrow. "I'm sorry about that."

A minute passed and he spoke again, but now there was a cold ring in his voice. "Those swine murdered him. That lying hound of a Doctor murdered him just as surely as if he'd cut his throat. If I ever get my hands on him

"Okay—okay—take it easy," interposed Ginger. "I know how you feel, but don't get het up. I've got an idea Biggles has something in store for Doctor Liebgarten, before he's through with him. You're lucky to be alive yourself. I was just thinking, . . ."

"Thinking what ? "

"If Biggles has got to come down the forest path we might as well wait for him and pick him up."

"How far down the river are you supposed to meet Algy ? "

"Three miles or so. There's a long straight reach with a sharp bend at the bottom. You can't mistake the place. By the way, Bertie will probably be with him."

" Bertie l Is he with you ? "

"You don't suppose he'd be left behind ? "

"Mon, that's grand. It'll be a treat to see him. What time are we due to meet the aircraft ? "

"As soon as it gets light enough to see."

"That'll be about six o'clock."

"About that."

"Then we've plenty of time on our hands."

"That's what I was thinking," agreed Ginger. "As long as we're on the spot to meet Algy when he lands it doesn't matter what we do in the meantime. That jungle path is going to be no joke for Biggles in the

dark. I reckon we might go on for a bit, then pull into the bank and wait for Biggles to come along. If he turns up before, say, five o'clock, we could all go along to the rendezvous together. But I should think he'll be here before then."

"Why did he stay, anyway ? "

"I don't think there's much doubt about that. He wanted to make sure we had a good start.

Had he come with us there would have been a hue and cry on our heels inside five minutes. It would have spread right down the river and perhaps made it risky for Algy to land. If we lost the aircraft, or even had it damaged beyond running repair, we should be sunk. But I think we've come far enough. I'll pull into the bank now. What are those lights I can see ? "

"Fireflies."

"Of course." Ginger turned the nose of the dinghy towards the bank.

"You'll find the mosquitoes waiting for you," warned Angus.

"In that case we'll only draw in close enough to keep out of their range," declared Ginger.

"We might even take it in turns to snatch a wink of sleep."

This was agreed and the dinghy was brought to a stop just outside the trees that lined the bank down which Biggles would come. It could not be moored as there was no anchor, but an occasional touch on an oar was sufficient to keep it steady. A few mosquitoes soon found the boat, but not enough to make the position intolerable.

"You lie down in the bottom and get some sleep, Angus," invited Ginger.

"No, I'm all right," protested Angus. "I've learned to do without sleep."

"Are you sure ? "

"Positive. Pull your socks over the bottoms of your trousers, turn up your collar and put a handkerchief over your face. It helps a bit to keep the mosquitoes off."

Ginger composed himself on the floor boards but could not sleep. His brain was too active. But he lay still, resting, for some time, listening

to the strange sounds that came out of the jungle. At last he sat up. "It's no use, I can't go to sleep," he announced. "What'

s that queer noise I can hear every now and then ? It sounds like monkeys chattering, but I thought monkeys went to bed at sundown, like respectable people ? "

"What you can hear," said Angus calmly, "is Indians, talking."

Ginger sat bolt upright. "Did you say Indians ? " "Aye."

"But—for the love of Mike I Where are they ? " "Some way down the river, I think."

" On this bank ? "

"Aye."

"What will they be doing there ? "

"They've probably made a camp for the night. They wander up and down the river."

"But if they're down there, on the bank, they'll be between Biggles and the rendezvous."

That will be all right if he comes in time for us to pick him up, but—"

"I know. I was thinking about that-. But Biggles should be here in plenty of time. I reckoned we'd pick him up, cross to the other bank, and try to slip past the wogs without being seen. Not that it will matter much if we are seen. They wouldn't be able to reach us with their arrows ; they haven't the range."

"That's a crumb of comfort, anyway," declared Ginger. He cocked an ear to listen. "They'

re like a lot of animals, squeaking and grunting."

"That's just what they are. Wait till you've seen them. It'll give you an idea of what we probably looked like a million years ago."

"You mean—like gorillas ? "

"Nothing like it. These forest Indians are dirty undersized little beasts, stark naked, bald as coots with enormous mouths and pot bellies."

When I say animals I mean animals, and not much of an animal at that. A decent dog could teach them a lot. They'll eat any carrion thrown up by the river—dead snakes, crocodiles—anything. They'd eat you if they got the chance. Between times they make shift on ants, bugs, beetles, centipedes or what have you. There is reason to suppose they also eat each other."

"Nice little people," observed Ginger.

"They just happen to be like that, and as they must have been like it for thousands of years apparently they don't want to be anything else. Fortunately, nothing will get them out of the forest. They've lived in the semi-dark for so long that they can't see in the light.

Liebgarten has made contact with them by throwing them food, usually stuff that has gone rotten in the colony. They get an extra dollop for bringing in any white man they find—which means, of course, anyone who tries to get out of the valley."

After that they fell silent again. Time dawdled on. No sound came to announce the approach of Biggles. Ginger looked at his watch and saw that it was after midnight. One o'clock came, two o'clock ; but not Biggles. In the forest all was now silent. The chattering of the natives had ceased.

"I don't like this," said Ginger uneasily, at last. "He should be here by now. What can be keeping him ? " "Suppose he doesn't come ? "

"Then we shall be on a spot," asserted Ginger morosely. "I shall be faced with the unpleasant choice of going back for him or pushing on to meet Algy."

"You'd better be making up your mind which it's to be."

Ginger considered the problem for a long time before he answered. "I shall have to go on to the aircraft," he decided. "Those were my orders, and we should look silly if we went back, only to find that Biggles went some other way to the rendezvous. There's just a chance that he might have swum the river and gone down the other bank — he'd be quite likely to do that if he were pushed, or to throw them off our trail. He may be followed, anyway, so we'd better stand by for a quick move. I'll give him till four o'clock, and then start down the river. We'll cross over first."

Angus agreed.

Then followed another weary period of waiting, with hope fading and anxiety mounting.

Three o'clock came, but no Biggles. The night seemed interminable. Angus helped to pass the time by relating some of his experiences in the valley. At the end he confirmed all that Biggles had surmised about his treatment during the past few hours.

Pedro had ridden up to say that the Doctor wanted to see him at the house. There seemed to be no reason to disbelieve this because he could not think why the Doctor should send such a message if it were not true. He had followed Pedro to the house, where he had been seized, and without explanation pushed into a disused cellar, where the key had been turned on him. He was still trying to guess the reason for his sudden imprisonment when Pedro had returned, taken him to the lounge, where the sight of Biggles at once solved the mystery. Not for a moment had he suspected that liberation might be at hand.

At a quarter to four Ginger bestired himself. " He isn't coming," he announced. "

Something's gone wrong. What worries me as much as anything is, if he should come just after we've gone he'll bump straight into that bunch of wogs."

"They'll soon be on the move," said Angus. "They only stay in one place long enough to scour it of anything in the way of food. But whether they'll go upstream or down I can't say. They must have been travelling upstream when they stopped for the night or we should have heard something of them. Hark ! This sounds like them coming now."

They listened, and while they did so the chattering began again, growing louder.

"Aye," said Angus. "They're coming."

"They'll see us."

"They will if we stay here," answered Angus.

"What had we better do ? Biggles is going to walk straight into them if he comes now, but I can't see that we can do anything about it, unless we start a free fight when they reach here."

"That would only bring Biggles along all the faster," opined Angus. "He'd think we were in trouble. No, I wouldn't do that. We'd better pull over yon side till they've gone past."

What followed fell out as Angus had predicted. From behind a safety curtain of ferns on the other bank they heard the pigmies go past, but could not see them on account of the darkness. As soon as the noise of their passage had died away Ginger picked up the oars, pushed the dinghy out into the stream, and started rowing.

The rendezvous was reached without further incident. Ginger pulled the boat close against the bank to leave a clear runway for the aircraft, shipped his oars, and settled down to wait for daylight, now not far distant. "This is a miserable business," he remarked lugubriously.

Angus did not answer. Presently he pointed to a pink flush that was stealing across the sky. "Here comes the dawn, anyway," he announced.

"Thank goodness that's turned up on time, at all events," muttered Ginger. Then he put his head in a listening attitude, at the same time staring up the long reach of water above them. "Do you hear something ? "he asked.

"Aye, I can hear it."

"Sounds like an engine."

"I reckon it is."

"What could it be ? "

"I should say it's the Doctor's launch," Angus shook Ginger by saying.

"Then she's looking for us, or Biggles." Ginger was aghast. "She's coming down the river, anyway," said Angus. "And she's pretty close."

"I should have set fire to her when I had the chance," said Ginger through his teeth. He turned his eyes skyward to where the pink stain of the coming day was spreading. " If Algy isn't here inside five minutes we've had it," he added sombrely. "If the worst comes to the worst we shall have to get on the bank."

"I don't think ye'll be doing that," returned Angus. " Why not ? "

"Can ye no hear 'em ? "

Ginger listened. His eyes opened wide. "The Indians ! They're coming back!"

"Aye. Sounds like they're running alongside the launch," said Angus. "I'm afraid we're between the de'il and yon dirty brown sea."

XI

BIGGLES SPEARS HIS MIND

HAD Ginger known the truth, that Biggles, far from being on his way, had not yet left the Doctor's establishment, he would certainly have been more upset than he was. What had happened was this.

For some time the situation in the Doctor's lounge remained unchanged. Liebgarten sat slumped in a chair, glowering, all his polish rubbed off him. Von Stalhein half reclined in his seat, composed, unsmiling, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Biggles sat opposite, watching them, also smoking, his pistol, lightly held, resting on his knee. He was doing some serious thinking. The presence of von Stalhein had put a very different complexion on things, not so much from the personal angle as the fact that, since he was not likely to be mixed up in a cheap money-making scheme, something more serious was afoot. What that could be was not easy to guess. It might, thought Biggles, be almost anything. Was this, he wondered, the hide-out of some of the Nazi leaders who had escaped from Germany ? It could be, he decided, but he had a feeling that there was more to it even than that. Those Nazis who had made provision for escape would also have made provision for money, he reasoned.

Now Biggles' intention in remaining behind was to give the others a good start. He hoped that he would be able to give them time enough to reach the rendezvous where, in due course, he would join them. He realised that as soon as he left the room the Doctor would lose no time in organising a pursuit, so the longer this was delayed, the better. He, Ginger and Angus, would have to pass the night somewhere, and he could not see how he could pass the time more usefully than by staying where he was. In this way they should all be able to get some rest, instead of standing on guard as would otherwise be the case.

Ginger and Angus had not come back ; there had been no shooting or other noises outside to suggest that they had been intercepted, so he felt sanguine that they had got safely away.

"How long is this going on, Bigglesworth ? " said von Stalhein after a while. "It's getting rather tiresome."

"It will go on for as long as I consider necessary," replied Biggles imperturbably, although in this, as events fell out, he was not strictly correct. However, what he said was his intention.

About nine o'clock the steward came in to announce that supper was on the table.

Biggles was expecting this and had an answer ready. "We shall be here for some time yet," he told the man, keeping his pistol hidden. "We'll go in when we're ready. You can go to bed if you want to."

The man may have wondered why someone other than his master should make this announcement, but seeing the Doctor sitting there, with von Stalhein present, too, he did not question the order. He went out, closing the door behind him.

More time passed—ten o'clock . . . eleven.

Von Stalhein yawned, and moved to put a fresh cigarette into his holder. "Now that the war is over, Bigglesworth," said he, "why don't you stop rushing about the world upsetting people who have not interfered with you ? "

"One must make a living," Biggles pointed out.

"That I will not deny," returned von Stalhein. "But there are easier ways of doing it than the one you have chosen."

"So I've been told," admitted Biggles. "But this happens to be the one that suits me."

Modesty forbids me

to say that it may be the one for which I am best qualified. If I didn't do this I don't know what else I should do.' "May I make a suggestion ? "

"As I've nothing better to do than listen, you may," conceded Biggles. "But you'll be wasting your breath. Any suggestion coming from you would be declined before you had finished talking."

"That's sheer prejudice."

"Call it experience."

"What do you want—money ? "

"Everybody wants money. I can't do without it any more than anyone else."

"How much would you need to—er—retire on ? " "I don't want to retire."

"Very well. What do you want out of life ? "

Biggles smiled faintly. "I've often wondered that myself. Believe it or not, I don't know.

Excitement, maybe."

"You've had your share of that."

"More than my share, probably. But excitement is like a drug. The more you have the more you want. Eventually you can't do without it."

"Yes, there's something in that," admitted von Stalhein, with a sigh. "War starts it. It provides a fellow with an overdose of thrill at the time when he should be learning a business. I know, because I've been through it myself. But I got over it."

"In that case what are you doing here ? "

"I'm not here from choice, you may be sure of that."

" Fiddlesticks ! The life a man leads is always his own choice. The man who says it isn't simply lacks the nerve to throw up something easy for something which he fears may be harder. He polders a stone-wall certainty, even though he doesn't like it, to facing an unknown hazard. Then, when he realises that he's a failure, he starts bleating about social security. I know the sort. Social security my foot. It may be all right for widows, orphans and old ladies, but I'd rather jump out of an aircraft without a brolly than admit I couldn't live unless someone else did my sweating for me. That goes for Liebgarten, and, since you're here, maybe for you too."

"What do you mean ? ! "

"You heard me. You prefer to sit in an arm-chair and let somebody else do the work.

You've no excuse. You've both got brains. Think what a salesman that glib partner of yours would make, von Stalhein. Why, he'd sell ice to Eskimos. No, you like it the easy way, both of you ; yet you have the brass face to sit there and accuse me of interference because I object to you sweating the life out of a friend of mine in order that you may sit here, clap your hands and order drinks. Pah ! Don't talk to me. You make me sick."

"You seem to forget that I offered you the hospitality of my roof and my table," said Liebgarten stiffly.

"Yes," sneered Biggles. "And who pays for it ? Don't tell me—I know."

"Still, I invited you to my house."

" Why ? For what ? Because that, you thought, was the easiest way of getting me where you wanted me. You even thought I might fall for this Garden of Eden line of dope you'

ve had so much practice at on the people you got here with your lying advertisement. Go on talking if you like, but you'll get no change out of me."

Another silence fell. This time it lasted for nearly three hours. Occasionally someone moved to a more comfortable position, or to light a cigarette. Biggles did not relax his vigilance

The end came suddenly. Biggles had just looked at his watch and noted with satisfaction that another hour would bring this wearisome inaction to a close, when, without warning, the door was opened and a man, a white man, came into the room.

"What on earth are you doing, Liebgarten, with your light still on ? " he asked without preamble. "Are you all right—?" His voice trailed away, and he stood staring, Then he seemed to sense that something was wrong, for he

dashed out leaving the door open. A minute later he could be heard shouting, not far away.

Biggles rose. "Pity about that," he observed. "It looks as if I shall have to leave you.

Think over my opinion of you, von Stalhein. If I hear that you've gone back home to help clean up the mess some of your friends made there—well, maybe we could get on different terms."

While he was speaking Biggles was backing out of the room. He closed the door, taking with him the key he had found on the inside, and locked it behind him. Then he ran quickly to the front door, which had also been left open by the unknown intruder in the haste of his departure. His voice could still be heard, calling, shrill with alarm.

Biggles paused for a moment on the top step to survey the ground and then set off at a run towards the garden gate. But before he had taken a dozen paces a black shadow detached itself from the background and came bounding across the lawn towards him.

For a moment he wondered what it could be, for he had forgotten Elizabeth. The animal recalled itself to his memory by a coughing grunt. Biggles did not hesitate. This was not the moment, he decided, to be mauled by a panther. His gun came up. Flame streamed from the muzzle as it roared. The panther fell, but it was on its feet again in a moment, snarling and biting at its shoulder. Biggles fired again and the beast dropped, still growling furiously.

He waited for no more. He started again towards the gate, but shouts in that direction told him that two men at least were coming in, although he could not see them on account of the dense shadow near the hedge. He made for the nearest bushes, but then, seeing that he was exposed to the view of anyone coming from the other direction, he ran on, dodging from tree to tree until he was level with the end of the house, in an area he had never seen.

By this time a number of people were moving about, running and calling to each other.

The Doctor and von Stalhein were among them. Four men were running towards the house from a bungalow which he thought must be the one Ginger had mentioned when recounting the adventure of his fruitless journey to meet Algy. Biggles remembered, too, what he had said about making a gap in the cactus hedge. It should serve as well as the gate—perhaps better, he decided swiftly.

Keeping close to the bushes and taking advantage of all the cover that offered he ran towards the spot, a course which forced him to pass close to the bungalow, the lights of which were now ablaze. To lend an even stronger atmosphere of activity a small searchlight now stabbed the night from the top of the Doctor's house and began a systematic quartering of the grounds. However, as its efforts were mainly concentrated on the gate, to which it returned constantly, this

did not cause him any great inconvenience.

In passing the bungalow he noticed that the door had been left wide open, presumably by the men he had seen running towards the Doctor's house ; and this he took to be a sign that the building had been temporarily evacuated. He stopped as a thought struck him.

Here was a chance to see inside the place, an opportunity that might never occur again.

One minute, two minutes, might be enough to yield information of major importance, perhaps the information he resolved to get before he left the valley. The risks seemed to be negligible.

Without giving these another thought he made for the door, and in a matter of seconds he was inside, standing in a small square hall, panting slightly from his exertions, making a lightning survey of his surroundings. There was little to see. To left and right ran identical corridors, with doors at regular intervals and one at each end. There were of course no stairs leading up from the hall, but he noticed a flight of steps—strictly speaking, a ladder—leading to a square wooden trap in the ceiling, the sort of loft which usually houses a water system and is often used as a lumber room. All this he took in at a glance, and as there was no sound of movement he proceeded quickly with his investigation, taking the left hand corridor for a start.

The first door opened into what was obviously a sitting-room. Nothing of great interest catching his eye he passed on to the next. It was furnished as a dining-room. He saw nothing of interest there, either. The next was a bed-room, and so were the rest with the exception of what was evidently a small store-room, with no outside window. The end room was the largest, and obviously a kitchen. By this time he realised that he had struck the living quarters, which in a way was natural enough. He did not know quite what he expected to find, but he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment, of frustration. Striding back down the corridor he crossed the hall and tried the other wing.

The first door stood open, with the light on, and he at once gazed on a scene more in accord with the reputation of the valley and the people who ran it. It was an armoury.

Several rifles and sporting guns stood in a rack against the wall. A number of Mauser pistols hung on hooks. There were empty places as if weapons had just been taken down, a surmise that was supported by

broken boxes and loose cartridges on the table. With more time at his disposal he could have spent several minutes in this room, but deciding that he had seen enough for the moment he passed on. The next room was a laboratory, or surgery, apparently the sick quarters. Rows of bottles lined the walls. Medical equipment stood about. There was even an operating table. Closing the door he went on to the next room. This was a workshop, with a bench carrying a lathe and precision instruments.

But it was the end room, the one that balanced the kitchen in the other wing, that brought his lips together and a furrow between his eyes. It was a drawing-office. A draughtsman's bench, with drawing-boards, T-squares and instruments occupied the wall under the window. Blue prints and tracings lay about. On a table were two models. He picked each one up in turn, had a good look at it, and put it back where he found it. Then he turned to a big drawing-board that filled the middle of the bench. He looked at the paper on it, leaned closer and looked again.

Resting his elbows on the bench he became engrossed.

It was the sound of voices at no great distance that reminded him of where he was and what he was doing. Then he moved swiftly. Ripping the paper from the pins that held it to the board he folded it tightly and thrust the somewhat bulky document into his breast pocket. This done he went out and ran down the passage to the door. Not until he peeped out did he realise the position into which his interest in the drawing had beguiled him. He had left his departure until it was too late. Several men, talking earnestly as they walked towards the bungalow, were within twenty yards of it. Three, carrying rifles, were hurrying ahead. To leave without being seen was out of the question.

For two seconds Biggles hesitated, undecided whether to advance or retreat, whether to rely on force to effect an escape, or to bide his time and leave quietly at a more opportune moment.

It was the fact that a ready-made hiding-place was available that decided him. Two paces took him to the step-ladder leading to the loft. He ran up, slipped the catch that secured the cover, pushed it back and went through. He just had time to replace the hatch when voices below told him that the men had entered the hall.

He was not unduly perturbed. There seemed to be no immediate cause for alarm. True, the situation had its awkward aspects, but provided these could be countered—and he felt that they should present no

serious problem—he thought that his reconnaissance had been well worth while. He had gathered in a few minutes more information than might have been gained in months by more orthodox methods. And, moreover, he was in a position to learn more. His entry into the bungalow had evidently not been suspected, so he felt reasonably secure. A search would be made for him, was actually being made at that moment, he had no doubt ; but it seemed unlikely that it would be pushed near home. His only regret was that he had not left himself a little more time so that he would not have to

take undue risks in order to reach the rendezvous at the appointed hour.

He took stock of his surroundings, although the place being in darkness there was little he could see. Two long skylights let in broad beams of moonlight, and what these did reveal puzzled him not a little. They fell on what appeared to be two long metal tubes of some size. He dare not move to investigate for fear of being heard by the men below who had stopped in the hall to conclude their conversation. To this he now concentrated his attention.

The chief speaker, whose voice he did not recognise, seemed to be in no good humour. "

You're a lot of blundering fools," he stormed. "You have one man to deal with and you let him go."

"We didn't let him go—he went." Von Stalhein spoke.

"Do you realise what will happen if he gets clear away

"He won't get away, Oberhaupt." This time it was the Doctor.

"I sincerely hope you're right," went on the first speaker. "The next thing would be an army of officials asking questions and demanding to be shown everything."

"He knows no more than when he came here," said the Doctor in a surly voice.

"Perhaps not, but if he gets this man Mackail away he may tell the whole story to the newspapers. Besides, this is interrupting my experiments."

Biggles frowned at this, wondering what the experiments were ; but

before he could give the matter serious thought von Stalhein went on.

"Bigglesworth won't go to the newspapers," said he. "I know him. He may go to the police, or what is more likely, he will try to tackle things his own way."

"Since you know him so well, my dear Erich, why did you let him outsmart you ? "

scoffed the first speaker. "You assured me you were confident of being able to handle any situation that arose. From what I can see of it you did nothing. You couldn't have lifted a finger. Did he strike you unconscious, or something ? "

"Bigglesworth doesn't strike anybody—at least, not with his fists," muttered von Stalhein. "He isn't one of these super-men who go about hitting people on the jaw. That isn't his way. I doubt if he could do it, anyhow. He has no weight behind him and his hands are more like a woman's than a man's."

"Then how does he get away with these things you've told me about ? During the war his name was always cropping up in my department."

"Since you ask me I'll tell you," answered von Stalhein politely. "What he lacks in brawn he more than makes up for with brain, plus sheer nerve. Look at tonight. The shock of seeing me must have been terrific, yet he didn't turn a hair. His brain must have gone straight into action because even before he sat down he knew just what he was going to do. It wasn't an accident that he sat over the flex."

"Donnerwetter! You let him get away with the threadbare trick of putting out the light ! "

"I was watching the light all the time, but I was thinking of the bulb, not the flex. In fact, I didn't know the flex was there."

"He saw it," said the man called Oberhaupt, with biting sarcasm.

"He would," returned von Stalhein, lugubriously. "I was watching his hands. How was I to know he was working with his feet ? The first intimation I had that he was doing anything at all was when the light went out. I daren't shoot for fear of hitting Rodnitz."

Biggles frowned. Rodnitz ? Who was Rodnitz ? It was the first time he had heard the name, which, from the way it was spoken, had slipped out. The only other person in the room was Liebgarten. It could only

mean that Rodnitz was Liebgarten's real name. He made a mental note of it.

Von Stalhein continued. "I'm not making excuses. I'm simply telling you that this man's instinct always to do the right thing is uncanny. I suppose that's the reason why he's still alive. Remember, you haven't only Bigglesworth to deal with. There used to be three of them ; now I believe there are four. They work as a team ; and they've been working together for so long that each seems to know by a sort of telepathy when another is in trouble. One never seems to get them together. Get one, and the others come after him.

To give the devil his due they make a formidable combination. I once tried to organise a task force on the same lines, but it didn't work."

" Why not ? "

"Because I found it impossible to eradicate certain factors inseparable from human nature, factors which Bigglesworth appears to have overcome."

"Such as ? "

"Oh—selfishness, jealousy, a tendency on the part of some, to use the British army idiom, to dodge the column. You can't rule those things out by any method that I know of. You'd have to find the men in which they simply do not occur."

"Leadership, Erich. Leadership. That's the answer. Find me this man Bigglesworth and I'

ll soon cope with the rest."

Sitting in his dark retreat Biggles smiled as he listened to this analysis of his character by the man who had most cause to hate him.

"Since you know his technique so well, von Stalhein, where would you judge him to be now ? " inquired a voice that had not previously spoken, cynically. After the others, it had a strange accent. This man, whoever he might be, was certainly not a German, noted Biggles.

"I can only assure you, Colonel, that you never know where he is, what he is doing or what he is thinking," replied von Stalhein stiffly. "He's just as likely to be in these grounds as anywhere."

"Oh come, von Stalhein, stop romancing," sneered the Oberhaupt.
"You've allowed the fellow to give you an inferiority complex."

"He may give you one, too, Stitzen, before this affair is finished," came back von Stalhein, in a voice which revealed that his patience was being tried.

Again Biggles' forehead knitted. Stitzen 1 Who was Stitzen ? He was soon to know.

"I've told you not to use my name here." The voice was that of the man previously called Oberhaupt.

Biggles made another mental note. So the real boss was Stitzen. The name was vaguely familiar, but in what connection he could not recall.

Von Stalhein went on. "Since you ask my opinion, I think, now that he has Mackail, he'll try to get away. Still," he added wearily, "where Bigglesworth is concerned nothing would surprise me."

"Well, talking won't bring him back," was the curt rejoinder. "Colonel, get all your men after him. Warn the Indians. Have the river banks searched—I think you'll find he's gone downstream. Send the launch out. Shoot him if there's any trouble—or better still, shoot him on sight. He's better out of the way. I'm going back to bed. I should never have left it, running a temperature with this infernal fever Between you you'll be the death of me.

You'd better be doing something too, Rodnitz."

Footsteps receded.

For a second or two Biggles thought they had all dispersed, but he did not move. Which was just as well, for presently the man who had been referred to as Stitzen continued the conversation, apparently with von Stalhein, who had stayed with him. Biggles noted, too, that there was now a definite touch of anxiety in his voice.

"Confound you, Erich. If you go on like this you'll end up by having me as intimidated by the fellow as you seem to be. I suppose he didn't come here ?"

"You mean—to this house ? "

"Yes," answered Stitzen uneasily. "We went out in such a hurry when

the alarm went that no one thought of

locking up. If he did come here . . . Schrecklichkeit I I don't like to think of what he might have seen."

"I should say he was in too much of a hurry to stop anywhere," opined von Stalhein.

"Still, we'd better look round to make sure. Johann was working in the drawing-office and he rushed off with the rest."

Voices receded. Doors were opened and closed.

Biggles waited for what he knew was now inevitable. As the result of a chance remark the drawing he had taken would be missed. He had hoped that the loss would not be discovered until the morning.

Here his thoughts were interrupted by the voice of Stitzen raised high in one of the rooms below. He knew what had happened. The document which bulged his pocket had been missed. There was nothing he could do about it. Presently the two men came back along the corridor.

Said Stitzen in an agitated voice : "Four years work gone in a moment. Think of it !

Curse the fellow. Johann will go out of his mind when he knows. Do something, Erich.

Let the others know. At all costs we must catch him now. Let the whole valley know that I'll give five thousand dollars to the man who catches Bigglesworth. I'd go myself but I'm so weak with fever

"I'll do everything possible," interrupted von Stalhein. Footsteps strode away. Stitzen shuffled down tilt, corridor. A door slammed.

Biggles relaxed, thinking over what he had heard. So the head man, the Oberhaupt, was Stitzen. He had heard, or read the name, during the war. He tried hard to remember in what connection, but could not. And Liebgarten was Rodnitz—a name that meant nothing to him. Another was the Colonel. Colonel who ? He was not a German, that much was certain. He thought the accent was that of a Latin American. With one thing and another the pattern of the plot began to take shape. Here, obviously, were a number of men, outlaws, outcasts, men

wanted by the police, some of them ex-Nazis, who had got together at the back of beyond, far from the reach of the law, to further a design of their own, which had for its ultimate objective the fulfilment of the dream of every man who has once tasted power—

the triumphant recovery of what had been lost. These men were not ordinary crooks.

They were something far more dangerous, because what they hoped to achieve could not be accomplished without bloodshed. These were the men who caused wars, men who thought nothing of the suffering involved as long as they got what they wanted. At present these conspirators had no country of their own. Each was like a rogue elephant, dangerous beast turned out by the herd, mischievous, cunning, ready to wreak vengeance even on its own kind.

Remembering where he was Biggles roused himself from his soliloquy with a start and looked at the luminous dial of his watch. He saw that with luck, without further delay, he might just be in time to keep the rendezvous. Not having a torch, an oversight which he now regretted, he flicked on his petrol lighter in order to see better the objects partly revealed by the moonlight.

Having looked at the drawing which now reposed in his pocket he was not surprised by what he saw. He was only mildly astonished to find that the object drawn on paper had actually been constructed, or was in course of construction. Supported on tressels was a long torpedo-like metal cylinder, one end rounded, the other pointed, but carrying a number of fins. Precisely what the object was he did not know, beyond the obvious fact that it was a weapon of some sort. Closer inspection he thought, would probably tell him no more, even if he had time for it, which he had not.

More than ever satisfied with the fruits of his foray into the enemy's camp he prepared to leave it with all possible speed. Knowing that a hue and cry was afoot he was aware that his trip down the river would be no easy matter. He remembered what had been said about warning the Indians. He also remembered that they carried poisoned weapons, and that he had only five shots left in his pistol out of a clip of seven.

Moving with the greatest care, disposing his weight as far as possible on both feet to prevent the boards from creaking, he felt for the edge of the trap. He expected to find a handle, but as there was none he tried prising it up with his finger nails. Failing in this he took a further

purchase by pressing his fingers against the wooden slat on each side. This raised the hatch the merest fraction of an inch from its seating ; then it came up against something that held it. This occurred at the precise spot where, he remembered, on the other side, the catch was placed. Then, of course, he realised what had happened—what he had done. The catch was an automatic one operated from outside only. Like the celebrated lady in the Mistletoe Bough he had locked himself in.

XII

THE COMING OF ALGY

Down the river, the fever of impatience in which Ginger awaited the drone that would announce the approach of the aircraft, can be better imagined than described. Everything, certainly the success of the expedition, and possibly their lives, depended on the outcome of the next few minutes. Nor was his anxiety relieved to any noticeable extent when he did hear the Navigator's motors, for at the same moment the launch appeared round the bend at the head of the reach.

" Och I The de'il run away with it I" was the only remark Angus had to make.

Ginger scarcely heard it. Anyhow, he made no reply. His brain was racing at a speed which threatened to put it out of gear, trying to solve the problem that now presented itself. It was how to reveal himself to Algy without at the same time allowing himself to be seen by those on the launch. It took him half a minute to decide that there was no way.

Whatever he did, whether he made a smoke signal or pulled the dinghy out on to the open water, would result in his being seen, if not by Algy in the aircraft, with its restricted field of view, certainly by those in the launch. Perceiving that there was no alternative he resolved to show himself and hope for the best, for it was all too clear that if they were not picked up now they would either be captured or left on the river for an indefinite time, without food and at the mercy of the Indians, to say nothing of the mosquitoes. Angus, from the look of him, needed both food and medicine urgently.

His decision made, as soon as the aircraft skimmed into sight over the treetops he dipped his oars into the water and with a single stroke sent the dinghy clear of the bank. Then, dropping the oars, he stood up and waved. Would Algy see him ? That was the next question to set

up a gnawing anxiety. He would probably see the launch first, for that was the larger object, and for a minute at least, concentrate his attention on it. Indeed, thought Ginger as a new horror occurred to him, Algy might even sheer off, assuming that the presence of the launch would automatically wash out the landing arrangements.

For a little while Ginger had no indication of whether he had been seen or not. He watched the aircraft bank slightly, tilting a wing to get a clear view, and knew that the pilot was making a reconnaissance. Then the machine resumed even keel, banked the other way in a steep turn that took it downstream, turned vertically and came back, losing height. The engines died.

"He's coming in, anyway," declared Ginger, in a voice slightly hoarse with excitement.

"He'll overshoot us," observed Angus calmly.

"No he won't ; he's beginning to slip off height 1 "

almost shouted Ginger. "I hope he's seen that launch."

"Aye. I hope he has, or he's liable to collide with her."

Ginger stared upstream at the oncoming surface craft. It was still some distance away and did not appear to be making any great speed, although plenty of smoke and sparks were flying from its funnel. He could see men standing in the bows looking at them.

"I reckon they haven't had time to get up a decent head of steam," remarked Angus, who was also watching the launch. "It takes more time with wood than with coal."

"Then I'm glad they haven't any coal," asserted Ginger warmly, dropping into his seat and grabbing the oars, ready to move fast towards the aircraft as soon as it touched down. He dare not try to anticipate the spot for fear he got into the pilot's line of approach. Holding his breath with suspense he watched the gap between the water and the keel of the aircraft slowly closing—all too slowly for his peace of mind. He knew that Algy, assuming that he was at the controls, could do no more. He was too low now to risk slipping off any more height, and so could only let the machine run its course.

With a smack and a zip a bullet slashed the surface of the river uncomfortably close to the dinghy. The report of the shot followed it. A second bullet close on its heels splashed water into the boat. A third

struck the dinghy somewhere in the stern with an unpleasant jar. Splinters flew. A flight of arrows plopped into the water.

"Hey I Get weaving I "ordered Angus crisply. "You're giving them a sitting target, and the little de'ils on the bank are getting close."

Ginger needed no urging. He dipped his oars and pulled ; and it was as well that he did so, for two more shots ripped through the ripples of their wake.

By this time the flying-boat was cutting a long creamy scar in the smooth surface of the stream. It lost speed quickly as it sank lower and the water clung to the keel, but even so, its way carried it on past the dinghy for some little distance. Still, by this time Ginger knew that he had been seen or Algy would not have risked a landing so near the launch, which was still coming on not more than two hundred yards distant.

Ginger was now on the move, putting his weight behind the oars, rowing as he had never rowed before, thankful in one way that the aircraft was now between him and the launch so that he was shielded from the rifle fire. On the other hand he was alarmed for the safety of the machine, for he could hear shots, some so close that he suspected somebody in the flying-boat was returning the fire. He did not turn his head to look. He seemed to be making slow progress. The dinghy had become sluggish in the water, refusing to respond to his strokes as it should. At first he thought that this was the natural result of his impatience, but when water started sloshing up through the floorboards he realised what had happened. The bullet that had struck the dinghy had made a hole below the water-line.

Angus must have become aware of this at the same time, for having shifted his weight



forward to lift the hole clear of the water, with scant ceremony he ripped up the floorboards, flung them overboard, and started baling at frantic speed with his cupped hands.

The difference this made was negligible, but if it did little good it did no harm, thought Ginger, as with sweat pouring down his face he dragged at the oars.

Algy's voice, coming across the narrow interval that still separated the dinghy from the aircraft spurred him to a last desperate effort.

"What are you waiting for ? 1" shouted Algy. "If you don't get a move on this kite'll be a sieve by the time you get aboard 1"

"Why don't you come and fetch me ? " yelled Ginger furiously.

"Because if I swing round I shall swamp you I " roared Algy. He went on in a voice brittle with alarm. "Watch out you don't push a hole in my hull ! "

Ginger had to look round to see where he was. Five yards away the cabin door yawned wide open. Shipping one oar in a single movement he backed with the other and brought the dinghy alongside. "Get in I " he shouted to Angus.

Angus obeyed.

Ginger dropped his remaining oar and followed—or tried to. But in his haste he forgot that he was not standing on a fixed platform. Consequently, as he jumped forward, the dinghy shot away under the pressure of his feet. He managed to grab the edge of the cabin floor as he fell, but the rest of him went into the water. Angus caught him by the collar. Mustering all his strength Ginger straightened his arms and got a knee up. Angus did the rest. Ginger fell into the cabin flat on his back, gasping and oozing water.

Subconsciously he heard the engines bellow and felt the aircraft quiver as it surged forward. Then followed a brisk fusillade of shots both from inside the cabin and outside.

As he raised himself to a sitting position Ginger heard Bertie's voice say : "By Jove I old boy, you fairly scraped her beastly funnel. I thought we were down the flue that time—

absolutely in the soot, and what-not."

Ginger buried his face in his hands and fought for breath. His heart was still pounding in his ears. A hand patted him on the shoulder. Said Bertie, in a voice full of concern : "I say, old lad, are you all right ? "

"Yes, I'm okay," panted Ginger, smiling wanly.

"Jolly good show," complimented Bertie. "By gad, you know, if the

boat-race crews could have seen you they might have picked up a tip or two. And old Angus doing his stuff. What a cox—what a cox I How are you, Angus ? How's ma bonny wee laddie the noo ? "

" Och, I'm nae so bad," answered Angus, smiling.

"What about the aircraft ? "asked Ginger. "From the amount of shooting you must have collected some lead."

"Nothing to speak of—at least, I haven't noticed anything," answered Bertie. "A little hole here and there, that's all."

"What about Biggles ? I "shouted Algy from the cockpit. " Where is he ? "

"I've no idea," replied Ginger. He got to his feet and took a look through a side window. All he could see below was a rolling sea of tree tops.

Turning back to Algy he went on. "Where are you making for ? "

"Nowhere in particular," answered Algy. "Give us a chance. I so nearly hit that perishing launch that I swallowed my tonsils. Where do you want me to go ? What am I to do about Biggles ? "

"He said he'd show up at the rendezvous, but he didn't," stated Ginger. "I don't know where he's most likely to be. You'd better get well away from that blighted river and I'll tell you what has happened. Let Angus take over for a bit. He knows all about it. Then I shall be able to talk to you and Bertie. We've got to do something pretty quickly, but until you know what the position is you won't be able to help."

"Does Angus feel fit enough to take over for a bit ? " asked Algy.

Angus said he did.

"Just keep cruising round in a wide circle," Ginger told him.

"I'll do that," agreed Angus, moving into the seat which Algy was vacating.

Algy joined Ginger and Bertie in the cabin. "Now, what goes on ? " he demanded.

In as few words as possible Ginger narrated all that had happened in Paradise Valley. "

We got Angus, and now we seem to have lost Biggles," he concluded wearily. "Now you know as much as I do you can form your own opinions as to where he's most likely to be.

We left him in the Doctor's house. Just what he intended doing after we left I don't know.

I suppose he couldn't say much for fear of showing his hand, but it was certainly his intention to turn up at the rendezvous. He didn't come, so he might be anywhere. It's no earthly use looking for him in that stinking jungle. What scares me stiff is the thought that he might have been captured. To make things more awkward there's a bunch of Indians prowling up and down the river bank."

"He might mark his position with a smoke signal," suggested Algy.

"He might, but I doubt if he'll dare to do that if he knows there are Indians about and that the launch is searching the river," replied Ginger dubiously.

"Something serious must have happened or he'd have been at the rendezvous," opined Algy.

"Absolutely—absolutely," murmured Bertie polishing his eyeglass.

"Well, what are we going to do about it ? " demanded Ginger. "We can't go on burning petrol indefinitely."

"It's dashed hard to know what to do for the best," brooded Algy. "Do you know if he intended pushing straight on home as soon as he had got Angus ? "

"I don't think so," returned Ginger. "He might have sent one of us home with Angus, but I'm pretty sure he wouldn't leave here himself without trying to get the rest of the Britishers out. In fact, he said so. He also said something about getting back the money they had put into the swindle. And on top of it all he was curious about the real racket which he swears is going on here." Ginger thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, it'

s quite possible that he deliberately hung back to have a look round before joining us, and in doing that got himself into a jam."

"Well, what do we do ? " asked Algy, looking at Ginger and Bertie in turn.

"I'm all for going down and pulling this cocky doctor's nose as long as a bally banana,"

said Bertie earnestly. "After all, I mean to say, who does the blighter think he is, keeping people in his dirty valley, and all that ? Infernal nerve. It's time somebody poked him on the nose. I'm flat out to do it, flat out like a cloud of steam—yes, by gad 1 What about it, chaps ? "

"It isn't going to be as easy as all that," warned Ginger grimly.

Bertie looked pained. "Here, I say old boy, don't tell me you're scared of the beastly scallywag ? " "It isn't one man. There's a bunch of them," reminded Fringer. "There's a bunch of us, too," argued Bertie. "Not a ery big bunch, of course, but enough to warm things up a it—if you see what I mean ? All we have to do is land ang in front of the house and make a frontal attack. hat's my idea—jolly good one, too. No messing about. an't go wrong. Every time a cocoanut."

1,

"Now you listen to me, you silly ass," requested Ginger curtly. "That valley's a death trap. Get that fixed in your jam-pot for a start. We're not dealing with wops, but with a pretty ropey bunch of ex-Nazis, unless I've inissed my guess. They'd shoot the machine to splinters before you could get to the bank, and where should we be if we lost the machine ? "

"Up the blooming creek without a paddle I suppose," admitted Bertie reluctantly. "Yes, I can see that. I'm no use at this sort of thing—no bally use at all. Too much organizing about it. Never was any use at organizing. You tell me what to do."

"Yes, let's do something," urged Algy. "We're wasting time and fuel."

"All right. I'll tell you what I suggest," answered Ginger. "They're looking for us down the river, because that's the way they assume we've gone. Very well. We'll go on up for a few miles—make a wide detour round the actual valley and strike the river, say, five or six miles upstream. Where we land will depend of course on what sort of place we can find to get down on. Having got down, two can stay with the machine while the other two walk down to find out what's happened. How's that ? "

"Sounds top hole to me," asserted Bertie.

"Suits me," concurred Algy. "The only thing I can see against it is, what

happens if Biggles turns up late at the rendezvous ? He'd probably wait there, expecting me to come."

"There's nothing to stop you from taking off and having a look there from time to time,"

Ginger pointed out.

"Okay then, let's go," concluded Algy. "I'll take over again." He went forward and relieved Angus at the stick

Angus came aft, and Ginger went forward and took the spare seat beside Algy.

For a little while Algy allowed the Navigator to cruise on an easterly course ; then he began to swing round in wide turn that was checked only when the nose of the flying boat pointed west. Presently the river came into view , afar off. Algy throttled back to half throttle and began a long shallow glide towards it. Ginger took the binoculars from their pocket under the seat. Focussing them, he could just make out, far to the south, the contours of the valley, with its squalid huts scattered about the open area between them.

At his suggestion, for he realized that to be seen or heard would be fatal to their plan, Algy edged a little farther to the north, where the river offered several long reaches any one of which appeared suitable for their purpose provided it was free from obstructions.

As far as the general depth of the water was concerned he had no great fear, but he was well aware of the risks they took every time they touched down on water not previously explored. Still, as Biggles had more than once remarked on similar occasions, there was always something that had to be taken on chance.

Algy was also uncomfortably aware of the responsibility that now rested on his shoulders. Normally it was Biggles, as captain of the ship, who accepted the onus. Now he, as deputy leader, would have to bear the burden.

He flew low up and down the river, over a stretch of perhaps two miles, several times before making his choice. No one offered advice unless it was asked for, as occasionally it was ; for example, when it was a matter of scrutinizing a piece of water for possible obstructions. This, obviously, was a matter wherein four pairs of eyes were better than one pair. Fortunately there was little to be feared from rocks, as the river did not flow through rocky country. The greatest danger lay

in striking a submerged, or partly submerged, tree, for these were all too plentiful, particularly in the shallows near the banks, where they had been deposited by the frequent spates. There were islands, but as these could be seen they could be avoided.

At last Algy was satisfied. He selected a long smooth reach into which a small tributary flowed, and cutting his engines, glided down. His face was a trifle pale, and the muscles of his cheeks tense with strain, as he dropped slowly towards his objective.

"Yell if you see anything," he requested.

But his fears proved groundless. The keel of the flying-boat hissed viciously as it gashed the placid but muddy water. The aircraft settled down as it lost way, and came slowly to rest, rocking gently, not far from the confluence of the tributary.

Algy mopped imaginary perspiration from his brow. "Thank goodness for that," he muttered.

Ginger was making a quick survey of the bank for danger. But the trees marched as stiff as a row of exclamation marks right down to the water's edge, and their shadows hid everything more than a yard or two back. The river was, in fact, a green canyon, punctuated by strips of light where the glaring tropical sun poured down. The steamy atmosphere was redolent with jungle odours, weedy and dank. "I think it's okay," he said.

"Who's going down the river ? " asked Algy, reaching for the throttle, for by this time the aircraft was beginning to drift with the current.

"Have you any grub on board ? " asked Ginger. "Of course."

"In that case I vote we have a bite before we do anything. Then I'll take Bertie with me down to the valley. You're in charge of the machine so you'd better stay with it. Angus needs rest, and a good dose of quinine. I know my way about the valley pretty well now, so I ought to go."

"Fair enough," consented Algy, and opening his port engine sent the machine surging towards the bank—or rather, towards the little bay formed by the estuary of the tributary.

The aircraft ran a few yards. Then its nose tilted sharply. Very slowly it listed until the port wing nearly touched the water.

"What the dickens has happened ? 1" cried Ginger.

"We're aground," answered Algy, in a voice in which incredulity and alarm were blended. Then he nodded sadly as the explanation struck him. "I must be out of my mind,

" he said dully. "I should have known there would be a mud bar across the mouth of a tributary that runs through soft ground. There always is."

XIII

A STAGGERING ANNOUNCEMENT

FOR a full minute Algy sat and contemplated the treacherous river with hostile eyes, feeling that he had been tricked. It was, he knew, a stroke of bad luck, but he did not claim this as an excuse for his misfortune. "I suppose I might as well switch off," he remarked, in a voice flat with resignation. He suited the action to the word. The air-screws stopped. Silence fell.

"Let's see if we can rock her off," suggested Ginger. "It sometimes works."

By this time Bertie and Angus had ascertained what had gone wrong. They agreed that rocking might do the trick, so the plan was put into operation forthwith. It consisted of shifting the weight of the passengers from fore to aft, and vice versa, as quickly as possible—a proceeding which produced from Bertie some facetious remarks that did nothing to improve Algy's frame of mind. When, to mark the time—as he explained—

Bertie burst into song, choosing the not inappropriate kindergarten one about "oranges and lemons," Algy desisted with a snort of disgust. "Let's stop this nonsense," he muttered angrily.

The trouble, as Ginger pointed out, was that there was not enough room in the cabin for the scheme to be effective.

"But look here, I say, if it rains the jolly old river will rise again and float us off 1" cried Bertie in a burst of inspiration.

Algy glowered. "If it rains! Can you make it rain ? "

Bertie looked a trifle astonished at the question. "Why no, old boy," he admitted frankly. "Can you ? "

"I—can—not," answered Algy emphatically.

"But it might rain," protested Bertie.

"It might snow, but it's thundering unlikely," sneered Algy. "Are you suggesting that we just sit here and wait for it to rain ?

" Why not ? "

"Well I don't want it to rain," asserted Algy positively.

Bertie adjusted his eyeglass. "You don't want it to ? "

"No. I'll bet when this river comes down in spate it brings all the muck imaginable. I don't want to have to take off through a sort of Sargasso Sea of dead trees." "Definitely not. I'm with you there, old lad, absolutely,

every time," agreed Bertie warmly.

"Oh, stop rotting," put in Angus. "Let's all get in the stern and jump together. I've known that to work in a small boat."

"We might try it," consented Algy.

They all walked to the tail end of the cabin, and at a word given by Algy they began jumping in unison.

Nothing happened, except that Bertie's eyeglass somehow got jerked out of his face and took a little time to find, during which period the operation had to be suspended.

"Do you know what I think ? " said Bertie, polishing the recovered monocle.

"Something terrific, I'll bet," returned Algy scathingly. "We're not jumping high enough,"

announced Bertie in the voice of a judge delivering a verdict.

Algy tapped him on the chest. "Do you know what would happen if we jumped any harder ? "

" No—what ? "

"We should go through the bottom of the boat into the drink—that's

all."

"Then it's no use—no use at all," acknowledged Bertie. "Silly ass I am, I didn't think of that. But you needn't be so bally peevish, old boy. After all, I'm only trying to help."

"If you really want to help, do you know what you can do ? "

"Tell me," requested Bertie. "Just tell me and it's as good as done."

"You can go and take a running jump into the river," said Algy, with brutal frankness.

Bertie looked shocked. "But I say, old boy, are you serious ? "

"We've one chance left to get this ship afloat," declared Algy. "The water is still falling so by tonight we're likely to be high and dry. We've got to get some weight out of her, and as we don't want to chuck the equipment overboard we shall have to jettison some human freight. With one or two bodies over the side she should lift several inches. That should be enough. After all, I didn't shove her into the mud very hard."

"Well, if that's all you want, laddie, nothing could be easier," averred Bertie. He sniffed.

" In any case I don't like the fug in here." And before the others realised his intention he had opened the cabin door and taken a flying leap into the turgid water. It closed over his head, but he was up in a moment, striking out in a strong overarm stroke for the bank.

"Look out ! Watch for crocs ! " said Algy tersely, whipping out his pistol.

His fears did not materialize, however. Bertie reached the bank without mishap ; but the final few yards were made through a few inches of water and apparently several feet of mud. As a result he looked not unlike a crocodile himself, at least, as far as colour was concerned, when he pulled himself up on the bank. Having reached a suitable spot he turned and waved, to be greeted by three grinning faces.

Bertie Seemed suddenly to realize the mess he was in. "Look at me " he cried plaintively.

"We're looking," jeered Algy.

"You're an ungrateful lot I " called Bertie sadly, and going back to the water he started to wash the worst of the mud from his person.

Algy returned his attention to the aircraft. That the relief from Bertie's weight had had an effect was instantly apparent, for the aircraft rocked much more easily.

"One more should about do it," said Ginger. "As I've got to go ashore I might as well go."

He paused, however, to take off his jacket and throw it on the floor. This done he took a header and swam to the land, wasting no time on the way. As he remarked to Bertie when he joined him, nothing encourages fast swimming more than the thought of a crocodile in the same water. When he turned to look at the machine he saw to his great satisfaction that this time the trick had succeeded. The aircraft was afloat and drifting slowly with the stream.

After that it was all plain sailing. Algy allowed the aircraft to drift well clear of the danger spot, and then, starting his engines, he felt his way cautiously to the bank, where those already ashore made the machine fast. Finding a suitable spot they washed the worst of the mud out of their trousers, after which they foregathered to partake of the food Algy was bringing ashore.

Now all this had taken up a good deal of time, and it was after noon by the time Bertie and Ginger were able to set off on their foray into the valley. And before they had gone far it became evident that progress was going to be slower than they had expected, for at this part of the river there was no track to make the going easier. They were compelled to force a passage through sheer jungle. Naturally, they chose the easiest way, but they were handicapped by having always to keep the river in sight at their left hand. Neither needed telling that without any other

features to serve as a guide, in the labyrinth of lianas and fallen trees through which they groped, a few minutes would be enough to see them hopelessly lost.

Just what progress they were actually making it was impossible to judge. According to Ginger's recollection of the terrain from the air, the distance to the more or less open mesa of the valley was about three miles. Sometimes, when they became involved in an exceptionally difficult patch of matted vegetation, he feared they might not get through at all. At the best the advance was never more

than two miles an hour, and that only for short distances. Bogs and fallen trees occurred with monotonous regularity to hinder them.

Ginger's concern at this loss of valuable time grew with each succeeding hour, and more than once he feared that the project would turn out to be a colossal blunder. When he had made this suggestion he had assumed that there would be a track of sorts ; and he could not forget that the struggle would have to be repeated when they made the return trip.

That it would have to be made in daylight was certain. It would be madness to attempt it in darkness.

The end came when blue sky appeared through the trees ahead, a welcome relief from the usual dense shadows. Ginger looked at his watch. The time was half past three. And he was about to pass this unwelcome piece of information to his companion when Bertie caught him by the arm with his left hand and at the same time pointed with the other.

"What is it ? " whispered Ginger, coming to a halt. "There's somebody there."

" Where ? "

"On the edge of the forest. A man. I saw him move."

"Then he must have heard us. We were making the dickens of a din," said Ginger, reaching for his pistol.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. A man whistled —the up and down note of one who tries to attract attention to himself.

Ginger looked at Bertie. "Can he be whistling us ? "

"Don't ask me, old boy," answered Bertie helplessly.

Then an even more extraordinary thing happened. A man's voice called, in English with a strong north-country accent : " Hi ! Are you there ? Get a move on. I'm waiting."

Ginger turned a dumbfounded face to Bertie. "He must be talking to us. No one else is likely to be here and he must have heard us coming."

"He's English, so we've nothing to worry about," Bertie pointed out.

"We'll soon solve the mystery," declared Ginger, walking forward, not without a certain amount of caution, however.

A dozen steps and they saw the man apparently waiting for them. At least he was craning his neck in an attempt to peer into the undergrowth. He was a complete stranger—a thin, sun-tanned fellow of about forty, clad in the rags of what had once been a flannel suit.

"He must be one of the farmers," stated Ginger. He walked boldly into view.

The man did not seem in the least surprised to see them. Indeed, he walked forward, saying : "Come on. I'm waiting for you."

"Waiting for us ? "returned Ginger incredulously.

"I am—that is, if you're the chums of a bloke named Bigglestone ? "

"You mean Bigglesworth 1"

"Could be. That's near enough."

"Yes, we're his friends," confirmed Ginger.

"I was hoping I'd run into you," said the man casually.

"You were hoping—what " Ginger stared, hardly able to believe his ears. "But wait a minute," he requested suspiciously. "How could you hope to find us when nobody but ourselves knew we were coming here ? We didn't know ourselves until a little while ago.

"

"Well, there was a chance you might be here, put it that way."

"Who are you, anyhow ? " demanded Ginger.

"That don't really matter, but Tom Brigham's the name. You'd better get a move on if you want to see your pal alive."

Being quite unprepared for a statement of this nature the full force of it did not for a moment penetrate into Ginger's brain. When it did, the shock made him incoherent. "

What did you say ? See—him—alive ? Are you talking about Bigglesworth ? "

"I told you, didn't I?" replied Brigham dispassionately.

"But what—what's the matter with him? What's happened?" Ginger got the words out with difficulty.

"I dunno, but he's dying," was the shattering response.

Ginger stared and stared again. The words had the effect of a physical blow. "Did you say—dying?" He hardly recognized his own voice. It sounded far away.

"He may be dead for all I know," returned Brigham calmly. "It's over an hour since I started and I've bin 'ere for some time. I wasn't a goin' ter face that jungle without a gun—not me. I was just pushin' off when I 'eard you a'comin'."

White to the lips Ginger strove to steady his reeling faculties. He felt stunned. "What happened?"

"Don't ask me—I dunno," was the careless answer. "He just asked me ter come this way ter see if you was about."

"Who asked you?"

"Joe Clarke—but I don't suppose you'd know 'fin."

"Clarke—Clarke . . ." The name rang a distant bell in Ginger's memory, but he could not recall where or when he had heard it. Indeed, he found it hard to think at all. "Have you seen Bigglesworth yourself?" he asked.

"But—"

"What I want ter know is, are you comin'?" broke in Brigham impatiently. "We've got a fair walk in front of us. It means cuttin' through the mesa—that's the nearest way. We don't want ter be seen."

"Why not?" put in Bertie aggressively.

"You don't seem ter realise there's a reward out fer you chaps—five thousand bucks; and that's a lot of money here. I don't know who'd give you away, but some of the foreigners might not be too particular. They're a mixed lot we've got 'ere."

Ginger, who had been striving to recall where he had heard the name Clarke recently, suddenly remembered. "You mean Joe Clarke, the

Cockney who has a shack at the far end of the valley ? "

"That's 'im."

"But what's he got to do with it ? " questioned Ginger, amazement lifting his voice.

"That's what I'm trying ter make you understand," answered Brigham wearily. "That's where your pal is."

Ginger could have struck the man for his ambiguity and off-hand manner, although he appreciated that as the fellow did not know Biggles he was naturally indifferent about his fate. "But what's Biggles doing in Clarke's hut ? " he inquired, still groping wildly for concrete facts.

"I told yer, didn't I? " cried Brigham. "He's had it. Are you a'comin', or do you want me ter miss drawin' my rations ? "

"Lead on," requested Ginger briefly.

XIV

NATURE TAKES A HAND

BIGGLES, in the loft, did not waste time brooding over a misadventure which not only crashed his immediate plans, but seemed likely to have serious consequences. He started forthwith to seek a way out, a tour of inspection that did not last long because it was soon apparent that there was no way except through the aperture provided for that purpose.

There was no other possible exit except through the skylights, and as these were merely glass tiles, not windows made to open, they offered no solution to the problem. True, at the risk of making a din which would certainly be heard by Stitzen—who presumably was still in his room—he might, by standing on one of the trestles, have dislodged some of the tiles ; but even so, he thought the hole thus provided would be too narrow for him to get through. He was therefore forced to the conclusion that the only way out was by the way he had come in, and he returned to the trap door to examine it more closely.

That it was of no great substance he knew. Such traps seldom are, on account of the weight factor. It consisted of an outside frame of fairly stout timber with the middle filled in either by three-ply or matchboarding. In the feeble glim of his nearly exhausted lighter he

could not tell which. This, he ascertained, was fastened to the underside of the frame with a security which would prevent it from being prised off by anything less than a heavy tool, and even then it would involve an operation which could not be completed without a considerable amount of noise. The only instrument that he possessed, excluding his automatic which was useless for this purpose, was his penknife. With this he thought it should be possible to cut a hole through the thin boarding, but how long this would take he dare not hazard a guess. It would depend almost entirely on the thickness of the material, which was something he did not know and had no means of finding out.

At first he tried probing for the latch with the point of his knife, hoping that it might be possible to force it back ; but he perceived after one or two failures that the most probable result of this would be a broken blade, which would not help matters.

After considering the matter he resolved to make four cuts in the form of a square, which could then be lifted out, leaving a space large enough for a hand to be passed through to the latch, which could then be unfastened. To cut round the entire inside of the frame was not a practicable proposition. Such a task would require hours of time.

Having made this decision he went to work. He could no longer hope to get clear in time to keep his rendezvous with Algy, and as in that case an hour or two could make little difference he worked with care rather than speed. Provided Ginger and Angus got through all would be well. That they would keep a lookout for him he did not doubt. He was confident of being able to take care of himself in the meantime, once he was out of the trap into which, with what he thought was an unpardonable lack of gumption, he had stepped.

The material on which he was working turned out, unfortunately, to be three-ply—

unfortunately because it was tougher than the straight-grained matchboarding which he had hoped to find. However, he went on cutting, taking care not to go right through at any one spot, for fear of the mark being seen, until he was ready to make the final incision that would clear the section on which he was working, a square of about six inches. He knelt to his task. It was heavy going with a small knife, on which it was impossible to get any real purchase ; and having to operate in the dark did not make things easier. His forefinger soon had a blister on it, and he was compelled to take an occasional rest. During one of these he bound up the finger, and his thumb, with a

strip torn from his handkerchief.

From the first to last the job took about an hour. By the end of that time the grooves he had made were sufficiently deep for him to be able to push the point of the knife through anywhere. Four stiff cuts now and the piece would be out.

He was bending to do it, his left hand bearing on his right wrist, when he heard someone open the front door and enter the hall below. This of course compelled him to wait, but he did not move his position, thinking that the newcomer would either retire to his room, or join Stitzen in his, in order to report the progress of the pursuit. Instead of which, Stitzen, who must have been wide awake, called out : "Is that you, Erich ? "

"Yes," answered von Stalhein's voice.

"There's a rat or a bird or something in the loft," Stitzen startled Biggles by saying. "I've been lying here listening to the thing gnawing. I don't want to get out of bed again with this fever on me, but it's keeping me awake. Besides, it might do some damage. Will you have a look to see what it is ? "

"All right," agreed von Stalhein.

It would be useless to deny that Biggles was dismayed, particularly after all his labour.

That anyone might go up into the loft at that hour of night was a contingency outside his calculations. Either he had made more noise than he was aware, or Stitzen must have extremely acute hearing, he thought, as he looked about desperately for somewhere to hide. Von Stalhein's feet were already mounting the steps.

Strictly speaking, there was nowhere to hide. The sloping ceiling was as bare as an arterial road. The only furniture was the trestles supporting the torpedo-like affair. The cover they provided would not have concealed the rat von Stalhein was expecting to find.

All Biggles could do was lie flat on the floor, just where he was, with his head pointing towards the trap and not more than a yard from it. Any other movement would have been heard by the man who was already slipping the catch.

A strip of light shot through from the hall and struck the ceiling as the trap door was pushed up. It grew broader. Von Stalhein's head and

shoulders appeared, still rising. He did not stop, but came right on up to the top, one hand holding a torch not yet switched on. His figure, almost filling the aperture, cast a grotesque shadow on the ceiling.

Reaching the level of the floor, leaving the trap wide open, he stood erect and switched on his torch. The beam sliced a wedge of light through the darkness, cutting it into halves.

It is possible to speculate indefinitely on the trivial things upon which enormous consequences so often depend. There was no particular reason why von Stalhein's torch should explore any particular area of the loft. He might have directed it to the left, in which case, had he held it low, he must have inevitably seen Biggles lying there. He might equally have directed it to the right, or straight ahead of him. It is likely that what von Stalhein actually did was not the result of a decision at all. He simply switched on the light, so that the beam flashed in the direction in which the torch happened to be pointing, and that, in the event—naturally, perhaps—was straight ahead, neither high nor low, but between the two. The apparent effect of the flood of white light across the middle of the loft was to make the rest darker.

The position of the light was not maintained for more than a couple of seconds, which again was perfectly natural. Seeing nothing, von Stalhein moved the beam slowly towards the right, covering floor and ceiling in turn. Had he moved it to the left the outcome of the incident might have been very different from what it was ; but as has already been observed, there was really no reason why it should move in one direction more than another, unless it is that a man, normally right-handed, tends to move towards the right rather than the left. Anyway, Biggles was for the moment left in darkness, with von Stalhein's figure looming huge and black against the light, straight in front of him.

And as the torch travelled, so, naturally, did the holder move with it.

Biggles was well aware that this respite could last only for a matter of seconds, when von Stalhein, satisfied that there was nothing on the one side, would turn his attention to the other. Biggles decided not to wait for this to happen. It would be better to strike before, rather than after, discovery. Moving with no more noise than the shadow on the ceiling, he rose to his feet, raised his right foot, thrust it into the middle of von Stalhein's back, and pushed. The result was spectacular but not unexpected. Von Stalhein hurtled across the floor as if he had been propelled by a catapult launching apparatus. There was a slithering crash as he fell and collided with the floor. The torch

bounded on, making a display like an enormous catherine wheel, and then went out. Even before that happened Biggles was half way down the steps. Having pulled the trap into its seating he went on down, leaving von Stalhein in the position in which he himself had been a minute earlier.

Stitzen's voice called sharply : "What are you doing up there ? " An inquiry that was not without justification.

Putting a hand over his mouth to muffle his voice, Biggles answered, making a not very successful attempt to imitate von Stalhein. "It's all right. I fell."

"Are you hurt ? "

"No," answered Biggles, who could hear von Stalhein blundering about overhead, probably looking for his torch.

Then von Stalhein really took part in the conversation. "Look out, Paul ! "he shouted in a voice brittle with shock and alarm. "There's somebody about ! "

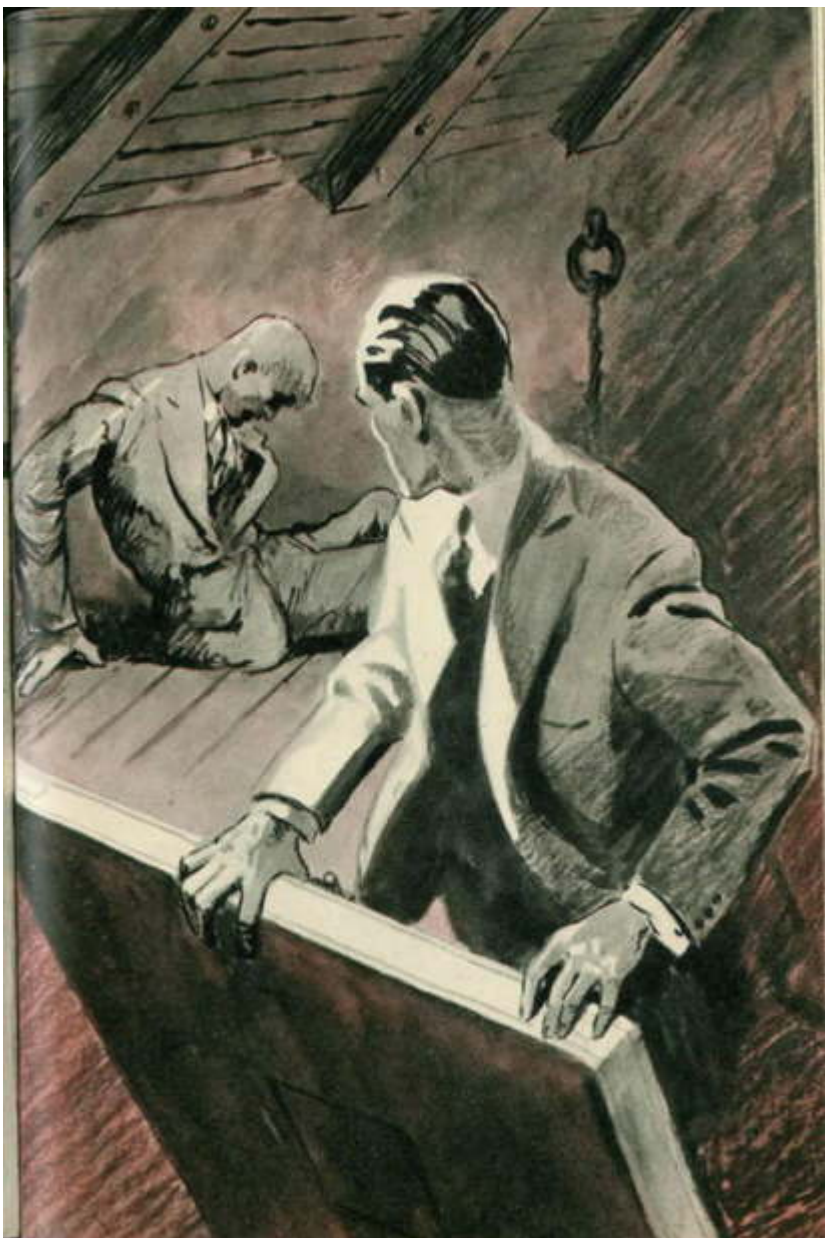
"What did you say ? "

Biggles could hear Stitzen scrambling out of bed, and waited for no more. He went out through the front door, and had hardly taken a couple of paces forward when an idea struck him, and he stopped again. He went back and stood close against the wall, near the door.

Von Stalhein was shouting frantically : "Let me out-- I'm locked in ! "

Biggles smiled as he heard Stitzen coming up the corridoi cursing under his breath. "

What on earth are you doing up there ? " he heard him yell.



Von Stalhein was by this time nearly choking. "Come up and let me out I " he shouted.

Stitzen went up the steps. The latch clicked. The trap door fell back with a slam.

Shadows falling through the open door told Biggles what was happening inside. Stitzen backed down the steps followed by von

Stalhein. Presently they stood in the hall, von Stalhein swearing softly in German as he brushed dirt from his clothes, and Stitzen demanding to be told what all the fuss was about.

"There was a man up there," grated von Stalhein. "I didn't see him, but it could only have been Bigglesworth. Just the sort of thing he would do."

"But you said you didn't think he would—"

"I said you could never tell where he was," rasped von Stalhein.

"Where is he now ? "

"Oh, he'll have gone. He wouldn't be likely to stay here," muttered von Stalhein.

Biggles stepped into the open doorway, his pistol hanging from his right hand. "Wrong again, von Stalhein," he said evenly. "Why look surprised ? After all, you yourself said no one knew what I'd do next—no, don't move, and when I say that I mean it seriously."

Von Stalhein inclined his head towards the loft. "Were you up there all the time ? "

"I was," admitted Biggles. "And believe me when I say that I found your conversation, a little while ago, vastly entertaining." As he spoke Biggles' eyes were searching Stitzen's face. It was vaguely familiar, but he could not place him.

"Well, how long are we going to stand here ? "demanded von Stalhein curtly, making an effort to recover his usual dignity.

"There's no need for you to stand here at all," replied Biggles. "Would you mind walking along the corridor to the left, keeping your hands up, until I tell you to stop. I'm taking no chances, so do behave sensibly."

Von Stalhein shrugged and did as he was ordered. Stitzen, a short, stoutish man, practically bald, followed.

"Stop now," commanded Biggles, when the pair drew level with the store-room. "Right turn and in you go."

"Do you know what's inside ? " asked von Stalhein.

"Of course," answered Biggles. "I've had a good look round. I've chosen

the store-room because there's no window. You won't get into mischief there, and I still have one or two things to do. In you go—and by the way, don't try shooting through the door. You'll only spoil the door, because I shan't be in line with it."

Von Stalhein looked at Biggles with an expression on his face that might have meant anything. Then he opened the door and went in. The look Stitzen gave Biggles was murderous ; but he did the same. Biggles turned the key in the lock and without a backward glance strode back to the front door and looked out. The garden was still drenched in blue moonlight. There was nobody in sight. Then he moved swiftly.

First he went to the pantry, where he selected an empty tin, one with a well-fitting lid that had contained cocoa. This he thrust into a side pocket of his jacket. He then retraced his steps, stopping when he came to the armoury. Entering, he took the Mauser pistols from their hooks and disposed them about his person. This done he filled his pockets with cartridges of one sort and another. Finally, he took the rifles and guns from their racks, tucked them under his arms and walked away. The weapons made an awkward load, but he managed somehow, somewhat carelessly, as if he had only a short distance to go.

Making his way to the rear of the bungalow he walked along the cactus hedge until he found the gap about which Ginger had told him. In getting through this he had a little difficulty with his burden, but he pushed on through, and arrived at the water's edge, shaking his head—for his hands were occupied—in a futile attempt to dislodge the mosquitoes that were settling on his face. Turning downstream he went on for a few yards, and then, with a grunt of relief, dropped the guns and rifles into about two feet of water. The Mausers and the cartridges he pushed well back into the hedge, out of sight.

Then, taking the tin from his pocket, he pushed the drawing, which he had taken from the drawing-office, into it, and secured the lid tightly. With this he was a little more particular, taking care to find a spot that suited him. Satisfied, he scraped a small cavity, put the tin into it, and covered it neatly with slabs of dry cactus, handling these cautiously on account of their thorns.

He had just completed this minor operation, and was

about to step back from the hedge, when he became aware of something large, black, soft and heavy, on the back of his left hand—

stuck there, it seemed. He could just see it in the dappled moonlight. Without giving the matter a thought, not having the least idea what it was, and in fact not paying much attention as he was occupied with other things, he shook his hand impatiently to get rid of the object. In this he succeeded, but at the cost of such an excruciating pain that he instinctively clutched at his hand with a cry of agony. It was as if he had been stabbed with a red hot needle, only the pain, instead of being local, shot right up his arm. For a second or two he stood there, scarcely able to think, conscious only of the pain. Then, the initial shock passing, he knew what had happened, and the reaction produced such a wave of nausea that he nearly fainted. He had been bitten, bitten by what is probably the most loathsome, and certainly one of the most venomous, insects of tropical America—a tarantula.

Mustering his spinning faculties he recovered himself with an effort and ran back along the edge of the river, splashing and stumbling in his haste to get to the gap in the hedge.

With human enemies he was no longer concerned, knowing that he was the victim of an attack even more deadly.

As soon as he was in clear moonlight he snatched off his wristwatch, for the strap was already cutting into the swelling flesh ; then he took out his penknife, opened it with one hand and his teeth—for his left arm was already numb—and with the blade deliberately cut three incisions across the crimson spot that marked the place where the poison-laden fangs had entered. Blood flowed from the self-inflicted wound, running hot over his hand. Slipping the knife into his pocket he sucked the wound, spitting the blood—and some of the venom with it, he hoped—on the ground, upbraiding himself bitterly for the folly of travelling in such country without a snake-bite outfit. Permanganate of potash was what he needed, to rub into the wound.

At this moment he remembered that there was a labora-

tory, or surgery, within forty yards of where he was standing. Whether von Stalhein and Stitzen were still locked up, or had effected their escape, he neither knew nor cared. If permanganate was there, and he felt certain that it would be, he would have it, cost what it may. Pistol in his right hand, the other hanging low, dripping blood, he ran unsteadily towards the bungalow. A deathly sickness was already coming over him as the poison spread through his system.

Neither von Stalhein nor Stitzen was in the hall. He could hear them kicking at the door of the store-room, but this meant little to him in

his extremity and he did not even glance along the corridor. He made straight for the laboratory, and having flung open the door, started searching along the rows of jars and bottles for the one he needed. It was there, but it took three precious minutes to find it ; and then, in his haste to get the cap off the jar, for he had only one hand and his knees to work with, he overturned the whole thing so that the purple crystals scattered themselves about the floor. Dropping to his knees he gathered some up and with his right hand forced them into the wound. There was nothing more he could do.

Fighting against sickness and faintness he told himself that he would have to hide—

hide—hide ; the words throbbed in his aching brain like a broken piston in a cylinder.

Leaving the room, and the building, he staggered towards the garden gate. Back to the gap in the hedge he dare not go for fear he collapsed in the water and drowned. He still clutched his pistol in his sound hand, and had occasion arisen he would have used it without hesitation. He stumbled over what he had taken to be a shadow. Without particular interest he saw that it was the dead body of Elizabeth.

Strangely enough, the gate stood wide open without a soul to be seen. He was feeling too ill to be grateful for this facility, and could only stagger on through trees that were beginning to waltz around him. Where should he go ? For what refuge should he make, to lie up like a wounded animal ? He didn't know ; he could no longer think clearly. All he knew was that he must keep on walking, for to rest now was to risk falling into a coma from which, at this stage of the venom, he might never awaken.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, and certainly without knowing where he was going, he blundered on, merely taking the easiest way across the mesa. As in a sort of horrid nightmare he saw that the dawn was breaking. Still he stumbled on, sometimes swaying, sometimes resting, conscious of only one thing, and that was the dreadful throbbing in his arm, now swollen beyond recognition. His hand was a round ball from which the fingers projected like rigid stumps.

How far he had walked he did not know. Time and distance no longer had meaning. His side felt paralysed. His heart pounded as it fought the toxin. He was no longer conscious of his limbs. Only the pain in his arm and the cold sweat on his face were real. Yet, curiously, in a

detached sort of way, he seemed suddenly to know where he was. At least, he had been over the ground before. There was a hut. He had seen it recently. A man lived there. He had spoken to him. His name was . . . he couldn't remember the name.

Perhaps he was in the hut now. He must get to it. He must get to it before his strength gave out. Swaying and swerving he went on. Then, in some mysterious way, the man was there in front of him, sometimes near, sometimes far, swaying about against a sky that in some strange way was turning black.

A voice spoke, as if from the far distance. "What's wrong, chum ? "it said. "You remember me don't you—Joe Clarke, the bloke you spoke to yesterday ? "

Biggles pointed to his hand. "Tarantula," he panted.

" Blimy I You poor blighter." Joe took the pistol from Biggles' unresisting fingers, put it in his pocket, got Biggles' arm across his shoulders and half-carried half-dragged him towards the hut. "Hold up, mate," he said tersely. His voice rose in a shout. " Hi I Lilt Gimme a hand."

Biggles became aware that a woman was supporting him on the other side. It was all getting indistinct. They got him through a door and lowered him on a truckle bed fitted flush against the wall.

Joe went to a box near the fireplace and came back with a bottle and a cup. Into the cup he poured some brown liquid and held it to Biggles' lips. "Drink up," he ordered. "It'll help you a lot. Keeps the blood going and deadens the pain."

Biggles did not argue. He drank. At that moment he would have drunk poison. In fact, he thought for a moment he had done so, for the liquid was like fire in his throat. He choked, spluttering, while his eyes filled with water. " What's—that ? "he managed to get out.

" Tequila—sort o' native booze," answered Joe. "Pretty raw stuff, but it might do the trick. •They say its better than brandy. We keep a drop handy in case o' snake bite."

Biggles lay back, breathing heavily, his left arm out stiff. Mrs. Clarke had pulled off his jacket, cut away the sleeve of his shirt and was putting something hot on the bite.

"It's a bad 'un," she said, looking up from the wound to her husband.

"The dirty little beast fairly got his teeth in," she told Biggles. "I often hear them ticking in the night," she added casually. "They tick like a clock, you know. They used to frighten me to death, but they don't any longer. You get used to anything in this place."

"Don't talk so much, Lil," chided Joe. To Biggles he went on : "Where's your pal—the one who was with you yesterday ? "

"I don't know," answered Biggles.

"I thought if you knew where he was I'd fetch him," explained Joe.

"He'll be—somewhere—on the river," returned Biggles. "Which way—upstream or down ? "

"Could be either—but most likely—down. Look for a plane." Biggles tried to get up, but Joe pushed him back gently.

Joe turned to his wife. "You stay here and do what you can for him. I'll see if I can find his pal. Maybe I'll get some of the others to help."

Biggles did not hear this last remark. He had sunk into a nightmare in which Liebgarten and von Stalhein were searing the flesh from the bone of his arm with red-hot irons.

XV

THE MAILED FIST

WHEN Biggles again opened his eyes he was alone, and it took him some time to remember where he was and what had happened. Gradually consciousness returned, and with it the throbbing ache in his arm, which he now saw was bandaged. But his head was clearer. The nausea had passed, but he still felt weak and ill.

Mrs. Clarke came into the room from the adjacent one, and seeing that his eyes were open, inquired cheerfully : "Feeling better ? "

"Much better, thanks," replied Biggles. "My arm is still pretty sore and my head aches, but not so badly as it did."

"That's a good sign," Mrs. Clarke informed him. "You should be all right now. It's the state of your blood that counts. It gets pretty thin when you've been here as long as we have."

"Where's your husband ? "

"He went off to try to find your pal. He's been gone a long time ; I can't think what he's doing."

"What's the time now ? My watch is in my jacket pocket."

"I reckon it must be close on four," said Mrs. Clarke. "You passed out on us, you know."

For a little while I thought you'd gone for good. Then you came round for a bit, but you were delirious. After that you fell off to sleep.

I reckon it was the tequila that did that. It's potent stuff."

Biggles could hardly believe that it was four in the afternoon, that a whole day had gone.

What, he wondered, were the others doing in his absence. No doubt they were looking for him. He also speculated on the search that he knew was being made for him.

Knowing what he now knew, he was quite sure that Stitzen would not let him leave the valley if he could prevent it. He wished he knew what was going on outside, but he did not feel equal to moving to find out.

The information was soon brought to him, and in no pleasant manner. There was a rattle outside of unshod hooves on baked earth. Mrs. Clarke started up in alarm, turning startled eyes to the door. A few moments later, without further warning, two big negroes, dressed in white drill suits, strode into the room. Both carried whips.

The first let out a shout when his eyes fell on Biggles. "Here he is ! " he cried exultantly.

"You leave him alone, he's sick," said Mrs. Clarke in a shrill voice.

The men ignored her. One walked over, caught Biggles by the collar of his shirt and jerked him to a sitting position, an action which wrung from Biggles a sharp cry of pain as his injured arm fell from the position in which it had been resting.

"Leave him alone, you bully," flared Mrs. Clarke, making a run at the black.

The negro, with an impressive display of muscular strength, brushed her aside with a casual sweep of his arm, one which, nevertheless, had

sufficient force behind it to send her reeling against the wall. He grinned unpleasantly and returned to Biggles. "Come on,

" he sneered. "On your feet."

Biggles was powerless to resist. His legs seemed to be made of india-rubber, and every movement of his useless arm was torture.

By this time Mrs. Clarke, undaunted, was returning to the attack, panting with fury. Her eyes blazed. She dashed at the black who was now hauling Biggles roughly from his couch, while Biggles ,groped at his hip pocket for a pistol that was no longer there. He couldn't remember what had happened to it, what he had done with it. Realising the futility of resistance he called to Mrs. Clarke to take care of herself. She took no notice, but catching the negro by the arm made a useless attempt to drag him away. Upon this the second black stepped forward, eyes narrowing. He swung his whip and struck. The thong whistled. It fell with a vicious slash across an arm which Mrs. Clarke flung up instinctively to protect her face. She screamed as it bit into her bare flesh.

"You swine," said a voice, thin, but clear, as taut as a bow-string with passion.

Both negroes spun round to face the door whence had come the words. Biggles looked, too, and there in the doorway stood Joe Clarke, face as white as chalk, lips parted, his breath coming fast from running or from the fury which was shaking him. In his eyes, turned on the negro who had struck his wife, was such a glare of blind rage that neither of the blacks moved or spoke. Or maybe it was the pistol that he held in his hand, Biggles' automatic, that made them pause.

"You cowardly swine," said Joe again, in the same strung-up voice. Not for a moment did his eyes leave the man who had struck his wife. He did not move. He did not raise the pistol. He appeared to be unaware that he held it. He just stood there.

The guilty negro must have read something in his eyes, for he made a dash for the back door. The movement seemed to break a spell. Life returned to Joe's paralysed limbs. His hand jerked up. The pistol spat flame and lead. The negro stopped. Quite slowly, he turned. He looked at Joe through a faint blue haze of cordite smoke with a strange expression of horror and surprise. And there for a moment he stood, his mouth opening and shutting. Then every limb seemed to collapse at once, and he crashed to the ground with a thud that shook the

whole building.

The second negro made a leap for the open door, but as Joe barred his way he turned on him like a panic-stricken tiger. With a terrific swipe of his arm he flung Joe with a crash and a clatter into the fireplace. The pistol flew from Joe's hand. With a yell of triumph the black whipped a knife from his belt. His arm swung up as he sprang at Joe, who, looking half-dazed, was trying to rise. The black had no eyes for anybody but him. If he supposed, as he may have done, that he had nothing to fear from a sick man and a woman, it was a misjudgment that cost him his life. With a single feline spring, her hair flying loose, Mrs. Clarke reached the pistol which lay where it had fallen. She did not appear to take aim. In any case she was too close to the black for that. When the pistol went off it was within a foot of his body, so close that the knife in its downward swing passed within an inch of her arm. The negro's momentum carried him on and he dived into the floor like a swimmer plunging into shallow water. Snarling like a wounded animal he tried to get to his feet. Mrs. Clarke fired again, and again, and again, and the body into which she was sending the bullets sank slowly to the floor. It did not move again.

Looking thoroughly shaken Joe got up. "Thanks, old gal," he said in a sort of choking voice.

Lil, her passion passing like a gust of wind, dropped the pistol, and sinking into a chair buried her face in her hands.

Joe looked at Biggles. "There's a woman for yer," he said proudly.

"You're a lucky fellow, Joe," answered Biggles, who for once had been a helpless spectator in a scene of violence. In his weak condition he was not feeling too good himself.

Came running footsteps, approaching the door. "Give me that pistol, quick," ordered Biggles, and then sank back, shaking his head as if the whole thing was getting beyond him.

In the doorway stood Bertie, gun in one hand, while with the other he leaned against the doorpost, surveying the scene of carnage with an expression of utter bewilderment. "

Here, I say, you know—" he began. Then he was pushed aside and Ginger, followed by a man unknown to Biggles, came into the room.

Ginger pulled up short, too, when he saw the picture the room presented. He looked at Biggles, at the dead men on the floor, then

back at Biggles.

"Something seems to have been going on here," he muttered.

"That swine hit my missus," explained Joe, before Biggles could answer.

"Looks as if he's finished knocking women about, yes, by Jove I" murmured Bertie approvingly.

Ginger went over to Biggles. "What's happened ? How are you ? Who —?"

"Just a minute—take it easy," protested Biggles. "I'm not too bad. I was daft enough to get myself bitten by a tarantula, and, by thunder! I've paid for it. My arm is giving me a taste of unadulterated hades, but I think it's getting better. At first I thought I'd had it—in fact, I was a gonner if it hadn't been for Joe, who found me."

"Brigham told us you'd had it, but he didn't know how." "Who's Brigham ? "

Ginger pointed at the man. "He found us and brought us here."

Joe, who had been examining his wife's arm, joined in. "I thought I'd better try to find you," he told Ginger. "I couldn't go up the river and down it at the same time, so I went downstream and got Tom Brigham to go the other way. Tom's all right. I told you I was going."

"I don't remember," said Biggles. "I don't remember anything after I got here."

"You'll be all right now," promised Joe. "You've passed the danger mark and in a day or two you should be okay. What are we going to do about this, that's what I want ter know

? " He jerked a thumb at the two negroes, still lying where they had fallen.

"Are they dead ? "

"As dead as they'll ever be. One got it in the heart and the other in the head. Serves 'em right. When I saw that swine hit my missus I went tearing mad. They've had it coming to

'em for a long time. One day I'll tell you some of the things they've

done—"

"Yes, but not now," interposed Biggles. "What do you suggest we do with them ? "

"We've got ter get rid of 'em, and quick," put in Brigham, who seemed a bit scared now that cold reason was asserting itself. " If it's found out that we laid a finger on one of Durango's men, we shall have had it all right, too."

" Durango ? Who's Durango ? "asked Biggles curiously.

"Colonel Jose Durango. Ain't you never heard of him—no, maybe you wouldn't. He's a Mexican. I heard all about him when I was up in Mexico City one time. I had a job there before I came here. He tried to start a revolution, but it came unstuck—not for the first time, either. He had ter bolt to save his neck. That feller who calls himself Liebgarten was mixed up in it, too. I reckon that's 'ow they got together. Liebgarten was in the German Legation in Mexico City. I saw him there, but I don't know what his proper name is. The papers said 'e was one of those who backed Durango, who was an admirer of Hitler's and wanted ter make the country Nazi. Wouldn't surprise me if they were plannin' another revolution right now."

"I see," said Biggles slowly. "Brigham, I think you've got something there. What you've just said clears away a lot of the mystery that was puzzling me."

"These negroes here—there are nine or ten of 'em—are Durango's men," went on Brigham. "He must have brought them with 'im as a sort of bodyguard when 'e had ter beat it out of Mexico. Durango's half a negro 'imself, yet they boss it about 'ere as if they owned the earth, the dirty lot of skunks. If yer laid a finger on one the others got out their whips."

Bertie put a word in. "Well, you've certainly laid more than a finger on them this time, yes, by gad ! " Mrs. Clarke looked up. "I suppose they'll call this murder ? "

Biggles smiled grimly. "They can call it what they like. If ever I saw a case of justifiable homicide, this was it, and I'll swear to that in court—if it ever comes to a court case, which somehow I don't think it will. I fancy most of the people here would prefer to keep outside a courtroom. As far as this pair of ruffians is concerned I think you'd better bury them right away."

Joe looked at Biggles. "We could plant 'em behind that big patch of cactus, just outside."

"All right," agreed Biggles. "You could put the ponies there as well for the time being."

Get a move on because I want to talk to you two fellows." He turned to Mrs. Clarke. "

Did that brute hurt you very much ? You behaved like a brick."

"I'm all right," answered Mrs. Clarke. "You don't think I'd stand here and watch those two drunken devils maul you about ? "

Brigham touched Joe on the arm. "Come on. Let's get the job done before it gets dark."

We haven't much time left."

"Give them a hand, Bertie," ordered Biggles. "Ginger, you'd better mount guard. We may have more visitors. You can stand in the doorway and tell me the news at the same time."

The gruesome task began. Ginger, standing in the doorway, told Biggles of the events that had occurred since they last saw each other. Biggles in turn gave Ginger a brief resume of his own adventures. This took some time, and before they had finished talking darkness had fallen. Bertie came back into the room with Joe and Brigham, to report that they had finished their unpleasant task. "What next ? " he inquired. " Algy will be bursting into another perspiration if we stay away much longer."

Mrs. Clarke lighted a smoky oil lamp, stood it on the table and set about rekindling the fire, which had gone out,

saying that she would make some mate* in lieu of tea, which could not be obtained in the valley.

The feeble yellow glow emanating from the lamp was just enough to illuminate a setting that was in keeping with the best traditions of conspiracy, and singularly appropriate to the discussion that followed : the crude shack with its rough adobe walls from which the original coat of whitewash, smoke-blackened round the fireplace, was peeling in long untidy strips ; the rude furniture standing about the earthen floor, with a sinister stain beginning to seep through the shovelful of sand that Joe had thrown on it; Biggles, looking ill after his ordeal,

propped up on the rough palliasse; Joe and Brigham, emaciated, ragged, unkempt, unshaven, watching Biggles with expressions dour and grim, eyes dark and deep set in faces from which hope had long been abandoned ; Lil, Clarke's wife, hair dishevelled, a wild defiant look about her as she stood with arms akimbo watching the flickering fire ; Bertie, monocle in eye, smoke curling from a cigarette between his lips, leaning nonchalantly against the wall, a pistol dangling loosely in his right hand ; and Ginger, a mere silhouette against a rectangle of dark blue as he stood in the doorway gazing out across the moonlit savannah. Behind him, in the near distance, the uncouth sagueros* which now guarded a dark secret rose stark against the sky. Moths and other insects, attracted by the light, drifted in to destroy themselves with dreadful deliberation against the fatal beacon that had lured them to their doom.

"Now listen, everybody," began Biggles quietly. "Either the Valley of Paradise is finished or we are. The time has come for a show-down. That is inevitable now that Liebgarten and company know that I've got their secret pretty well buttoned up. If we don't strike at them they'll strike at us—at my party on account of what we know, and at the rest of you because two of their negroes have been killed. Search parties are out looking for us. We, to save

* Mate, a South America form of tea. t Sagueros, a giant form of cactus.

ourselves, must strike first, and we haven't long to do it. We may have more visitors at any moment. Once we are located the chances will be against us. The hut will be surrounded and anyone trying to get out will be shot. If we strike first the odds will be with us. When I say strike I don't mean that literally. I doubt if the law would approve of us crashing in on Liebgarten and shooting the place up without warning. It is true we might bolt in the aircraft that I have here ; but there are others to consider, and we should be a pretty poor lot if we abandoned them. Again, what about the money you fellows have invested in this bare-faced swindle ? I am supposing, of course, that you have all had enough of it ? "

"I'd had enough before I'd been here a week," asserted Joe.

"And me," growled Brigham.

"But I say, old boy, if you're not going to attack Liebgarten and you're not going to waffle along home, what are you going to do—if you see what I mean ? "inquired Bertie.

"What I am going to do is this, provided I can get everyone who wants to go home to co-operate," answered Biggles. "I shall muster the strongest force I can raise. We shall then march to the house where I shall present Liebgarten with an ultimatum. It will demand the return of the money of those who want to go, and the use of the launch for transport down the river. If he agrees, so well and good. If he refuses, then we shall take what we want and go anyway. If Liebgarten resists by employing physical force he will have struck the first blow, in which case we should be justified in protecting ourselves by force of arms."

"But we ain't got no arms," put in Joe.

"Oh yes, we have," asserted Biggles. "I took an opportunity of emptying their armoury. I have several rifles, guns and pistols, hidden in the river, with a fair quantity of ammunition. When we leave here our first step will be to recover those weapons in order to arm our party."

"By gad! That's marvellous—absolutely marvellous," congratulated Bertie. "This is going to be fun."

"Possibly, but I doubt it," murmured Biggles drily. "Now Joe, I want you to tell me how many British there are in the valley who want to go home."

"Everybody wants to go home, but they ain't all British," answered Joe.

"For the time being we'll stick to those we can trust. How many English speaking are there ? "

Joe made a quick calculation. "I make it ten British, including Louis—he's a French Canadian. Digger Saxby is an Australian, and Pete Vandall is a South African. Call it ten altogether—or twelve with me and Brigham."

"That's fine," said Biggles. "The Empire seems to be nicely represented. We'll show this bunch of crooks what we can do when we get together."

Brigham looked at Joe. "What about the two Yanks who live close to me ? They're all right."

"Let's have them in the party by all means," decided Biggles. "That makes fourteen, which should be enough. Now, tell me, Joe, how

many of these chaps have wives with them ? "

Joe gazed at the ceiling. "Let's see . . . Carson's wife died last week so she don't count, but the baby's still alive. I make it five wives six counting Lil. Some of 'em have youngsters, but I dunno exactly 'ow many. Which reminds me, there's Mrs. Harboard.

Her husband was a real toff. He's dead, but she's got a couple of nippers. She's been tryin'

ter carry on alone."

"Do all these people live reasonably close ? " was Biggles' next question.

" Within a couple o' miles."

"All right," said Biggles briskly. "That's enough to go on with. We'll leave the others out of it for the time being. Now Joe, I'll tell you what I want you and Brigham to do. You know your way about. I want you to make a quick round-up. Split the area between you.

Bring all these people here—husbands, wives and children. Don't say too much. Simply ask them if they want to go home, and if they say yes, tell them to pack anything they want to take with them and muster here as quickly as possible. I aim to move off at four o'clock, so that should give you plenty of time. By the way, have any of these fellows been soldiers ? "

"Most of 'em, I think," replied Joe. "Like me, it was because they didn't know what ter do after they was demobbed that they came 'ere."

"Suppose Liebgarten agrees to this evacuation, are you going to leave him and his gang here ? " asked Ginger from the door.

"Of course," returned Biggles. "There's nothing else we can do. We've no legal right to push them off what I imagine is their own property. Naturally, I shall make a report to the authorities when we get out ; they may do something _about it. All right, you fellows, get going. Try not to be seen, and warn everyone to do the same. Don't forget there may be searchers out."

Joe and Brigham went off.

"What about Algy and Angus ? " asked Ginger.

"There's nothing we can do about them for the moment," answered Biggles. "You say it's impossible to get through the forest at night so they'll have to stay where they are until it gets light. By that time the show should be settled one way or the other."

XVI

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS

IN twenty minutes the first of the refugees arrived. He introduced himself as Ivor Jones, one time of Cardiff and an ex-corporal of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. He brought no luggage, but carried a slashing hook such as is used for hedging. He looked at Biggles, Bertie and Ginger, in no small astonishment when he walked in. He was told to sit down and make himself comfortable.

Others began to drift in and Biggles did not trouble to ask their names, which probably he would not remember. Two men came with their wives ; one had a small boy of about seven. Mrs. Harboard, with her two children, looking frail and tired, came next. And so it went on. Biggles had a word with them as they arrived, saying they would know what it was all about when the party was complete.

The room began to fill, and the floor was soon strewn with bundles containing the refugees' worldly goods, mostly tied up in old blankets although there were one or two battered suitcases. Louis, the French Canadian, strode in, excited and voluble, ready—as he said—to mop up the whole works. Digger Saxby and the two Americans came in together, from the same area ; tall, lean and burning for action, they were a tough looking trio, and, thought Biggles, as his eyes ran over them, a useful addition to his force.

At two o'clock Joe Clarke came back to say that he had finished his round and not one of those on whom he had called had elected to stay. Shortly afterwards Brigham appeared carrying a baby under one arm and supporting its mother with the other. He reported that two of the men were down with fever and too ill to move.

By three o'clock the tally was complete and the little room presented a spectacle which none present was ever likely to forget. The women sat together while the men squatted round the walls, saying little, some looking bewildered by this sudden and unusual event.

All showed signs of what they had suffered ; in some cases their vitality had been so sapped by fever that they were inclined to be

apathetic. Two men and one of the women were obviously sick even then, and in no condition to travel far ; but they had refused to be left behind. Mrs. Clarke handed round chipped enamel mugs of mate. Before doing this she had arranged Biggles' left arm in a sling saying that it would be more comfortable that way, While they were waiting

Joe asked him how it was, and on receiving Biggles' reply that it was much better, told him he was lucky.

"I've known a tarantula bite to take months to get right," he asserted. "I reckon it all depends on the state of yer blood. You ain't bin 'ere long enough fer the dimate to affect you. After a few months here you can't get a wound ter 'eal. We've had several fellers die from snake bite."

At a quarter to four, Biggles, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed so that he faced the assembled company, called for attention. Silence fell, and all eyes were turned on him as he stated his name and described in a few words how the state of things in the valley had reached him through Linton, and of his decision to fetch his friend, Angus Mackail. " Naturally," he went on, "I didn't like leaving without giving anyone else who has had enough of this place the opportunity to come along. Please understand that I'm not trying to persuade anyone to leave ; but if you've had enough this may be your chance to get out. Now then : is there anyone here who wants to stay ? "

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

"Then I take it you all want to go ? "

There was a unanimous chorus of assent. "Do we look as if we wanted to stay ? " said one of the women bitterly.

"The next point I must make clear is this," continued Biggles. "There may be some trouble about your departure. I mean, the people who are running this racket will try to prevent it. . . . If there is anyone here not prepared to accept the risk of being hurt let him say so now. There's still plenty of time to withdraw."

Nobody spoke.

"Very well, then," resumed Biggles. "Is there any man here not prepared to put up a fight for his freedom should it come to war between us and the Liebgarten party ? "

Only one man answered—Digger, the Australian. "I'm burning to get

at those dingos, but what are we going to fight with ? "

"Weapons that I shall provide you with," replied Biggles.

"They're not mine. They belong to Liebgarten and his friends. They were in the armoury in the bungalow. I've put them where we can get at them. Not only shall we have the benefit of them, but we shall deny the enemy the use of them. By the way, in case you don't know it, Liebgarten isn't the head man here. The real boss is a man named Stitzen.

Just who he is and what he is I don't know, but he's the big noise behind this Paradise Valley outfit."

"I guess I can tell you who he is," drawled a voice.

Moving his eyes Biggles saw that one of the Americans had spoken, a raw-boned Texan who had given his name as Cyrus Walden

"Yes, Cy, and who is he ? " asked Biggles casually, little expecting what was coming.

" Stitzen's an Austrian doctor who was lent by the Nazis to the Japanese government to carry out research work in tropical diseases. That was before Pearl Harbour."

Biggles' eyes opened wide in astonishment. "How on earth did you learn that ? "

"In the war I was in the U.S. Signal Corps," explained Cy. "Some of the messages about Stitzen passed through my hands—that's if he's the same man, and in view of what he's doing here I reckon he is. The description fits, anyway."

"What is he doing here ? " demanded Biggles, with mounting amazement.

"Carrying on his experiments in tropical diseases and using human beings for guinea-pigs," was the sensational answer. "That's what he was doing in the war. Our people wanted him because he'd been working on American prisoners. When we broke in he couldn't be found. Somehow he must have got here. Naturally, I didn't know that till I arrived, and then it was too late for me to do anything about it."

This revelation lifted a curtain from Biggles' eyes. And from Ginger's. He understood now the remark he had overheard about experiments,

when he made his first trip to try to contact Algy.

"Do you mean to say," asked Biggles slowly, "that Stitzen has been experimenting on people here ? "

"I've no proof, but I'm pretty sure of it," answered Cy. "What was to stop him ? After I learned his name, I reckoned I had it figured out why he was always ready to hand out medical attention—the only thing here that was free. I kept an eye on some of his patients and I didn't like the way some of them died after he'd stuck a needle into them.

There was nothing I could do about it so I kept my mouth shut or maybe I should have got a shot of the same dope next time I went down with fever. That skunk's killed more patients than he's cured, I can tell you that."

There was a general murmur of confirmation.

" I see," said Biggles quietly. "It looks as if we shall have to take care of Stitzen in due course. For the moment our job is to see about getting out—or seeing about getting the women out, at any rate. Once we start we've got to go on, because if our scheme fails it's going to be a bad business for anybody left alive in the valley. But time's getting on. We ought to be moving. We've got a pretty strong force ; most of you have been soldiers so we ought to be able to handle the opposition, which consists, as far as I can make out, of about fourteen men, including Colonel Durango's black supporters. It's unlikely that they'

ll be together ; some of them will be out looking for me ; I don't think they'll be prepared for a force the size of ours, so we should catch them on one foot. All right. Let's be going. I want all the men to line up outside in single file. The women and kids will wait here until they're sent for. My plan is to march straight to the river, to the place where I'

ve hidden the guns. If anyone tries to interfere with us on the way—well, he'll find he's bitten off more than he can chew. No talking. It may save a lot of trouble if we can catch the enemy napping. I shall lead the party, but I want a man who knows every inch of the ground to come with me as a guide."

"That'll be me," said Joe. "I know every stone between here and the river."

"Okay, if you say so," agreed Biggles. "Let's go."

Within a minute the men had lined up outside in a manner which showed that they had not forgotten their military training. Joe, who was with Biggles, looked at his bandaged arm and made a suggestion so sensible that Biggles adopted it.

"You don't want ter set that arm of yours off agin'," he remarked. "We've got some roughish country ter cross. Why don't you ride on one of the ponies we tied back of the sagueros?"

"That's a good idea," agreed Biggles.

Joe went off and came back leading one of the ponies. Biggles mounted. He ordered Ginger, who had a pistol, to keep near the head of the column. Bertie, also having a pistol, was told to cover the rear. In this order the party moved off.

The long tramp across the silent moonlit mesa was an experience to be remembered. On all sides the land lay flat and apparently desolate, a lonely world—as Joe described it—

of cactus, sand, mesquit, sun-stroke, snakes and fever. Even the tough cacti, looking like monstrous deformed bodies in the dim light, seemed to be holding up their arms in supplication to heaven for deliverance.

Twice a halt was called as a result of minor alarms. On the first occasion two horsemen cantered across the front of the column towards the Doctor's house. The second was when three men were seen walking in the same direction, having apparently come up the river. On neither occasion was the party seen and so in due course the first objective was reached without trouble. This was the river bank a little downstream from where the southern side of the cactus hedge joined the water. Here a halt was called while Ginger went on alone to reconnoitre the landing-stage. He returned almost at once to report that the launch was not there.

"I imagine she's still on the river looking for us," opined Biggles. "All right, let's get the weapons."

The recovery of the rifles, guns, pistols and ammunition, was a dirty, uncomfortable job, rather than a dangerous one. A human chain was formed along the edge of the water with Biggles at the head of it. He pointed out actual spots where the guns were concealed, and as they were recovered one by one they were passed back along the line. Biggles called Bertie and Ginger and to them showed exactly where he

had hidden the tin holding the plans. He also told them what it contained.

"For the moment it's better where it is," he said softly. "But if anything should happen to me one of you must recover it and get it home to Raymond. A lot may depend on that.

He'll know what to do with it."

The party was then remustered by the landing-stage where the weapons were washed to remove any grit that might have got into the working parts. They were then distributed with appropriate ammunition.

"The next thing I want to find out is, if anyone is on duty at the gate," said Biggles. "The job must be done quietly."

"That's me," said a man, who's name Biggles did not know. "I was in the commandos."

"Good enough," agreed Biggles. "Don't do anything. I just want to know if anyone is there. Ginger, you know your way through the gap in this hedge. Take Joe with you and reconnoitre the bungalow and Liebgarten's house. We must know who's about and where they are. Take your time. No noise. Be careful."

Ginger and Joe disappeared into the darkness.

After a short period of waiting the ex-commando was the first back. He reported that two blacks were on duty at the gate. They were standing together talking loudly in a way which made it clear that they thought the guard was a waste of time.

"We'd better have them out of the way," Biggles told the scout. "Go and get them. Take three men with you. Do the job quietly if you can. No shooting unless it's necessary to save your lives."

Everyone wanted to go, but Biggles selected the

Australian and the two Americans as most suitable on account of their size and physical condition. The four men disappeared along the hedge like fading shadows.

There was now a longer period of waiting. It ended when Joe came back to report that the bungalow was locked up. There were no lights in it anywhere. Lights were on in the Doctor's house, however, and

judging from the sound of talking everyone was in the Doctor's sitting-room. Ginger had remained behind to watch, in case any of them left the house.

"Thanks, Joe, that suits us nicely," acknowledged Biggles.

A few minutes later the ex-commando came back with two of his men leading a thoroughly scared negro, whose hands were tied behind his back. The other black, it was reported, had tried to get away so it had been necessary to knock him on the head. He had been tied up and Digger was sitting on him to make sure. There had been a little noise, but not enough to do any harm.

"Good work," complimented Biggles. "Now we can get on. Single file, everyone. We'll make a start from the garden gate."

The party moved off without a sound, and presently, at the gate, joined Digger, who was still sitting on the negro who had been foolish enough to resist capture. Biggles led his troops to the nearest clump of bushes where another halt was called. Joe pointed out the spot where Ginger was hiding, and was sent to fetch him.

Biggles looked at the house. The only lights were in the hall and in the Doctor's lounge.

For a minute or two he considered the situation and then turned to where the others were waiting for further orders.

"Listen boys," he said in a low voice, "there are two ways of handling this show. The first is to rush the place and grab everyone in it. That it would succeed I have no doubt, but there would almost certainly be shooting, and shots would mean casualties. I want to avoid casualties if it's possible. Moreover, we've got to watch our steps or we may find ourselves in hot water when we get back to civilization. We've got to keep on the right side of the law ourselves. There isn't a war on now. We're in a friendly country, and if this is the legal property of the people in the house I don't think that a court would approve of our taking matters into our own hands. We know we should be justified in shooting the place up, but it might not be easy to make a judge see the thing in the same light, particularly if two or three people happen to get killed. The alternative is to try negotiations first. If they fail, then the thing will have to take its course. For a start you'll surround the house to make sure that no one enters or leaves, while I go inside to discuss matters with the enemy."

"Say, you'd be crazy to go in there," protested Cy. "You're liable to be shot before you get to Stitzen. There are bound to be guards."

"Most of the blacks will be out looking for us," argued Biggles. "The last thing Stitzen will be expecting at this moment is that I'm out looking for him. I'll try it, anyhow. If you hear what sounds like trouble inside, rush the place. If I'm not out in ten minutes, come in. Avoid shooting if you can, but if the enemy starts it, don't hesitate." Biggles turned to Bertie. "Sorry, old boy, but I've got a job for you. I want the machine here. Do you think you could find your way to Algy ? "

"Absolutely," declared Bertie. "Bit of a bore, and all that, but if you say so. . . ."

"All right. Tell him to take off and fly down here. Say that by the time he gets here the thing should be over one way or the other. I'll make a signal if it's safe for him to land. If he doesn't get such a signal he'll know that things have gone wrong, in which case he's to push straight on to Buenos Aires and tell the British Consul what has happened."

"Good enough, old warrior. So long." Bertie went off at a sharp walk.

Biggles returned to Ginger. "You take over here now.

You know what you've got to do. Place your men so that all doors and windows are covered, but take care they don't shoot each other. I shall be back in a few minutes. If I'm not, you'll know that something has come unstuck." He turned down the drive.

"What about your gun ? "asked Ginger.

"I don't think I shall need one, but I have one in my pocket if I do," replied Biggles.

Turning away he walked on.

XVII

BIGGLES CALLS THE TUNE

BIGGLES went on to the front steps, mounted them, and turned the door handle. The door opened. He went in.

Two negroes were lolling on chairs placed side by side in the hall. They looked as if they had been dozing. Hearing the door open they

turned their heads. Slowly, their eyes opened wide, showing the whites. They did not move. They simply stared, one with his jaw sagging. It was evident that shock had so slowed down their mental processes that their brains were unable to grasp what their eyes revealed. But at last one seemed to comprehend, and began to move, very slowly.

"Sit where you are," snapped Biggles.

There must have been something about his manner that commanded obedience, for the man who had started to move sank back again. He moistened his lips, still staring at Biggles as though he was fascinated—as indeed he may have been, by the force of Biggles' personality. Certainly he was intimidated.

Biggles went over to them. "Do you want to go on living ? "he asked curtly. "Please yourselves. Speak up. I'm in a hurry."

The negro whom he had addressed particularly opened his mouth and shut it again. He turned affrighted eyes to his companion, then at the lounge door from behind which came a low buzz of conversation. Then he looked back at Biggles, but all he could do was stammer.

"Listen," said Biggles. "All the men in the valley are outside that door. They have guns.

They don't like you. They want to shoot you, but I've asked them to give you a chance.

We don't shoot people who surrender, so if you want to save your lives go out and walk down the steps with your hands up."

The two blacks looked at each other with dull, brutish faces.

"If you don't believe me go and have a look," suggested Biggles softly. " If I'm not telling the truth there will be nothing to prevent you from coming back in here, will there ? "

Turning his back on them he walked to the lounge door. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see the two negroes walking slowly towards the door talking in nervous whispers.

Biggles turned the handle of the lounge door and looked in. The movement passed unnoticed by those inside so he entered, a ghost of a smile softening his features as he listened to the conversation.

He saw at a glance that Joe's summing up of the situation had not been wrong. Everyone was there. Some he knew, but there were one or two he had not seen before. There appeared to be quite a crowd, but when analysed it resolved itself into eight men all told.

There was Stitzen. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, legs apart, looking anything but pleased. Liebgarten, to give him his adopted name, leaned against the sideboard, a glass at his elbow. Facing them was von Stalhein, as immaculate as ever, his inevitable cigarette holder between his lips, supported by the fingers of his left hand.

Among those Biggles had not seen before was a sleek, pompous-looking, dark-skinned little man, with a long upswept black moustache. He wore a white uniform with a blaze of medal ribbons, so

Biggles had no doubt that this was the Mexican rebel, Colonel Durango. Two others of the party, with nothing particular about them, Biggles could not place at all. The steward was there, standing a little apart as if waiting for orders. On a chair in the background sat Pedro, the overseer. That an argument of importance was in progress was evident. At the time of Biggles' arrival it seemed to be

getting heated without leading to any result, each trying to talk the other down.

"Before we do anything else we've got to find this interfering Britisher, Bigglesworth,"

insisted Stitzen, loudly.

"I tell you, you're wasting your time," answered von Stalhein in a tired voice. "

Bigglesworth has an aircraft. After what has happened you don't think he'd be such a fool as to stay here, do you ? He'll be hundreds of miles away by now."

Biggles walked slowly forward. "Really, von Stalhein, I should hardly have thought it possible for anyone to be wrong as often as you are," he said evenly.

Silence fell, a silence that seemed stretched and strained to a point where it must snap. All eyes turned to the interrupter, but nobody spoke.

Biggles continued to walk forward until he stood on the outre edge of his audience.

Stitzen was the first to recover his voice. "How did you get here ? " he almost choked.

"I walked in," answered Biggles. "Judging from your recent remarks you should be glad to see me."

"You won't find it so easy to walk out this time," rasped Stitzen.

"Your guesswork is as wild as von Stalhein's," Biggles told him. "Be sure that I made provision for that before

I came in. As a matter of detail, I have no intention of walking out."

"You seem to have had an accident, Bigglesworth ? "

remarked von Stalhein, looking at the arm which Biggles still carried in a sling.

"Yes," admitted Biggles. "I knew there were some poisonous reptiles in Paradise Valley, but I had the bad luck to be bitten by one that I'd overlooked."

"Mind you don't get bitten again," warned von Stalhein. "No fear of that," returned Biggles. "The other reptiles have had their fangs drawn."

"What did you hope to get by coming here ? " asked Stitzen in a curious voice.

"I'll ask the questions if you don't mind," replied Biggles. "You will do well to listen to them carefully because I have no time to waste."

" You haven't," sneered Liebgarten. "This time, my dear sir, you're going to stay here for a long time."

Biggles shook his head. "You don't seem to have quite grasped the situation," he murmured. "Let me explain. Every man in this valley capable of carrying arms now has a gun, a rifle or a pistol. You'll forgive me if I didn't ask your permission to borrow them from your armoury. This house is surrounded. Two of your black bullies are dead ; others are surrendering, so you needn't look to them for help. The fellows outside are impatient to get at you—an attitude which I'm sure you'll understand. In order to avoid unpleasantness I've asked them to

give me ten minutes with you to discuss terms. If at the end of that time a decision has not been reached I cannot hold myself responsible for what they might do. And, I may say, whatever they did would have my sympathy, if not my approval. A little while ago, Stitzen, I heard you give orders that I was to be shot on sight. I shall need little excuse to return that compliment."

"Terms ? "questioned von Stalhein. "What exactly do you mean by terms ? "

"Ultimatum would perhaps be a more apt word—but let us not quibble about that,"

returned Biggles. " Here is the case. You brought these unfortunate people here by false pretences. We all know that is so, so don't waste time denying it. Realizing how they have been duped they want to leave. They lent you money. They want to take it with them when they go. That's all. If you agree to

give them their money and let them go they will take no further action against you. We should require to use the launch, of course. The evacuation might take a couple of days, during which time, for your own sakes, I should ask you to retire to the bungalow and stay there. We shall have to use this house as a clearing depot while the evacuation is in progress. That's all. The matter is not open to

discussion. Answer yes or no, quickly please, because I have only five minutes left."

"How do we know you're not bluffing ? " asked one of the men whom Biggles did not know.

" Don't be absurd," said Biggles shortly. "How far would bluffing get me ? Go and look outside if you like, but I warn you that you are liable to be shot. I could have marched in here with a dozen ex-soldiers behind me had I

wanted to. As it is I'm giving you a chance you don't deserve."

" No I No ! " shouted Durango, as if he realized suddenly what the terms involved. " No I Don't give the money. I need it."

"So do the people to whom it belongs," said Biggles coldly.

Durango banged on the table. "I shall need money," he babbled excitedly.

"Where you are going people don't need money,"

corrected Biggles. "The Mexican government will see to that."

Durango extended a quivering finger at Biggles. "So you send me back ? "he cried shrilly.

"No," returned Biggles. "When the Mexican government knows where you are I imagine they'll fetch you."

Durango appeared to go mad. He raved. He stormed. He attacked Stitzen, the Doctor and von Stalhein in turn. "Why do you let one man do this ? 1" he screamed.

"Go outside and learn to count," invited Biggles in-perturbably. He turned to the others. "

You've three minutes left to make up your minds. I have no objection to your discussing the thing—if you think there is anything to discuss." He sat down and with a little difficulty lit a

cigarette.

A quick, whispered discussion, followed. Presently von Stalhein came over to Biggles. "If we agree to this proposal will you give your word not to mention the matter after you leave here ? "

"On the contrary I shall make a report to both the British and Argentine governments," said Biggles.

"We're not in Argentina."

"That's for you to prove to the Argentine officials who, when they hear about this, will no doubt be along to see for themselves. I have no authority here or I'd arrest you myself. That's their affair. I hope they shoot the lot of you."

Von Stalhein went back to the others. Another heated

argument followed. Biggles listened dispassionately. One of the unknown men strode suddenly to the door and looked out. Biggles made no attempt to stop him. In a few seconds he came back. "It's true," he said bitterly

"There are men everywhere."

A few more words passed, then von Stalhein spoke to

Biggles, a cynical smile on his face. "All right, Bigglesworth. You win."

"A wise decision," congratulated Biggles without emotion.

"How much money do you want ? "

"As much as is due, no more, no less. I'll find out."

Biggles left the room. He went to the front door. It was just getting light. He called Ginger, who came at the double. "Okay," he said. "They've packed up. March the men in. Line them up across the room."

"Nice work," said Ginger. "By the way, the launch is back. We've taken it over, with five prisoners. They're under guard."

"Good enough," acknowledged Biggles, and went back to the lounge where the conspirators were still arguing amongst themselves.

Presently Ginger appeared, his troops in single file behind him. They looked a motley crowd, but there was a grim, military precision about them, that spoke more plainly than words.

After they had halted Biggles turned to Liebgarten. "Unlock the safe," he ordered. "I'll have Mackail's money for a start."

Liebgarten threw a bunch of keys on the table with a gesture that was an insult in itself.

"I said open the safe," said Biggles, with iron in his voice.

Liebgarten hesitated, then thought better of it. He picked up the keys and inserted one in the heavy door. The safe swung open.

"Put the money on the table," ordered Biggles. Liebgarten withdrew a long drawer in which notes of

several nationalities were held in bundles by rubber bands. Biggles beckoned to Ginger. "

Count out six hundred

and forty pounds in English money," he requested. Ginger complied.

"Put that in your pocket for Angus," said Biggles. "Joe 1"

Joe stepped forward.

"Give him his money, Ginger."

"Five hundred and twenty quid," said Joe, grinning. Ginger counted out the notes while Joe stuffed them in his pocket.

"Next 1 " called Biggles.

And so, while the light of day came in through the windows the curious scene went on, one man after another marching up to the table and collecting his money while the piles of notes in the drawer got steadily lower. Stitzen sat watching, his chin on the back of his hands. Von Stalhein smoked, apparently unmoved. Durango paced up and down, alternately cursing and pleading, calling his companions cowards for allowing themselves to be robbed. When all those present had been paid Biggles returned the drawer to the safe, locked it and put the key in his pocket with the remark : "There are more to come yet." It wrung a groan from Durango.

All this took some time, and Biggles had barely finished when the drone of aero engines announced the arrival of the aircraft.

"Take over here for a bit," Biggles told Ginger. " go and bring Algy down. I want a word with him."

He went out and waved as the flying-boat roared low overhead. When he knew that he had been seen he made a signal to the aircraft to land, which presently it did, taxiing up to the landing-stage where Biggles awaited it on the deck of the abandoned launch.

Algy stood up in the cockpit. "How goes it ? "he asked.

"It's all buttoned up," replied Biggles. "Make fast and come ashore. I'll put a guard on the machine. I've just paid off the British and United States contingent. They're in the house with as sorry a bunch of crooks as you ever saw in your life."

Algy, Bertie and Angus joined Biggles on the launch.

"What next ? " asked Algy as they went ashore."

"I'm afraid we're going to be busy for a bit," announced Biggles. "I'm going to bring everybody to the house, all nationalities, and then start to evacuate them."

"By air ? " Algy looked alarmed.

"No. We'll fly the sick people, and the women and kids, to Buenos Aires. The others will have to go down in relays in the launch. I think the government will lend a hand when they know what's happened here. When we've had a bite of food, Algy, I shall have to ask you to fly the first load down. Go to the British Consulate and hand in a letter which I'll write presently. Then come back here."

"Okay," agreed Algy.

"Let's go up to the house and get things sorted out," said Biggles.

Five hours later, when the Navigator returned from Buenos Aires, an extraordinary scene greeted Algy's eyes. There were people everywhere in the Doctor's garden, apparently enjoying a free-for-all picnic. It seemed that

the entire valley had converged on the Doctor's house—which in fact it had.

If Algy was surprised, so was Biggles when he saw the passengers Algy had brought with him. There were six, and they were introduced to him in turn. Among others were Sir Gyles Sayers, of the British Embassy, with his assistant. The others were officials of the Argentine government, headed by the Minister for the Interior and the Chief Medical Officer of Health. They, too, looked about them in amazement.

"I got your letter," Sir Gyles told Biggles. "What on earth's been going on here ? "

"Let us go up to the house and I'll tell you all about it." The proposal was accepted.

Then, in what had been Liebgarten's lounge, Biggles narrated the story of how Linton had sent for him in London, and all that had happened since. "I'm afraid I adopted unorthodox methods, Sir Gyles, and for that I must apologize to the Argentine government—if, in fact, this land is Argentine territory, about which there seems to be some doubt ? But I feel that in no other way could I have succeeded in rescuing my friend Mackail. I can only hope the authorities will take the view that the end justified the means."

"I think they will," opined Sir Gyles. "I've discussed the matter at some length with my Argentine colleagues on the way up, and they are as

astonished as I am. They knew nothing about this, of course. In fact, they did not know anyone was here. The land has certainly never been applied for, much less bought, by anybody. They had no idea that such dangerous people as Stitzen and Durango were in the country. How they got here is a mystery. They will of course be put under arrest pending a full enquiry. Where are they now, by the way ? "

"Locked in their rooms in the bungalow," answered Biggles. "I've been looking through their papers and I fancy two of the men whom I hadn't identified when I wrote to you are a German engineer and his assistant—a fellow named Johann Kraft, one of Krupps'

armament experts. He was working on a new V-weapon, the V-17, when the war ended, and he's been trying to finish it htre. There's a workshop and a laboratory, and in the loft you'll find a mock-up of the weapon. By a curious chance it was the chemicals from the laboratory running into a ditch, thereby killing the cactus, that played a big part in our operations—but that's another story. Here are some plans I removed from the drawing-office for safe custody." Biggles handed over the drawing he had taken.

After a glance at them Sir Gyles looked grave. "This is a more serious business than I at first supposed," said he. "It begins to look as if you've done a bigger job than rescuing a friend. I think we'll go and have a word with these prisoners before we do anything else."

He turned to the Argentine officials. "Don't you think so ? "

They agreed.

"I'll leave you to it," said Biggles. "I've plenty to do and I want to get home myself.

Moreover, my fellows have been up all night so they could do with some sleep."

The party broke up, the officials going to the bungalow and Biggles joining the others in the house, where a meal had been prepared. He was not particularly hungry, so after a snack he curled up on the couch to snatch a few minutes rest, a preoccupation in which the others, disposing themselves in the comfortable arm-chairs, presently joined him.

From a short but refreshing sleep he was awakened by shouts punctuated by shots. It was evident that something was happening outside, but feeling that there were enough people there to handle any

trouble that might arise he was not unduly concerned. Anyway, he felt disinclined for further exertion. So he yawned, lit a cigarette, prepared to allow the others, who were still asleep, to sleep on.

However, this pleasant state of affairs ended abruptly when Sir Gyles and his colleagues came into the room to announce some startling news. Stitzen, they informed him, was dead by his own hand, having hanged himself with the

cord of his pyjamas. That was only the beginning. Before taking this final step he had set fire to his room, presumably in the hope of destroying the bungalow and all that it contained, including the records of his own damning experiments. He may have overlooked the fact that his fellow-conspirators were confined in the same building, or he may have determined that they should die with him. That would never now be known.

However, the fire had been discovered, but by that time it had taken such a hold that it was necessary to remove the other prisoners. In the confusion some had tried to escape.

Durango had been shot and mortally wounded. Liebgarten and von Stalhein had tried to get away in the launch, but being frustrated in this had dived into the river and attempted to swim to the other side. Liebgarten had been pulled under by a crocodile in full view of the spectators. Shots had been fired at von Stalhein, who may have been hit, but had succeeded in reaching the far bank where he had disappeared into the jungle. Search was being made for him. The others had been recaptured.

Biggles was not particularly upset. It was, he remarked, poetic justice that Liebgarten had been destroyed by one of the very factors on which he had relied to keep his victims in the valley. "As far as the others are concerned—well, I've no particular interest in them now," he concluded. "It may be all for the best that the secret weapon should go up in flames. The world will lose nothing by that, and it may gain a lot."

"By the way, there's no reason why you should stay here if you would like to get home,"

stated Sir Gyles. "My colleagues and I have talked the thing over and we've agreed that the best thing would be for the government to take over. They will attend to the evacuation. There's no shortage of food so another day or two is neither here nor there.

Some of the settlers may even decide to stay when they learn that the place is to be properly run under government control. If you will give us a lift to Buenos Aires we will set the necessary machinery in motion. I'll

take care of the British subjects. No doubt the other national offices will do the same for their people."

"That suits me fine," agreed Biggles. "I'll fly Mackail home. He needs treatment, so the sooner he's there the better. I'm supposed to be on holiday, and I think I can find a brighter spot than this to finish it. How soon will you be ready to start ? "

"We're ready as soon as you are."

Biggles stood up. "Then what are we waiting for ? Come on, chaps. Let's say good-bye to the boys and drift along. We'll try to squeeze Joe and his wife in with us. I like that couple. That's all I think. We haven't been here long, but I fancy we've seen everything that's worth seeing in the Valley of Paradise."

"Absolutely old boy—absolutely," agreed Bertie. "I'm all for better and brighter holidays."

"Still, you can't say it's been dull, so far," protested Ginger, as they walked towards the door.

THE END

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